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Yerevan architectural controversies in the early Soviet Armenian novel: Mkrtich Armen and Derenik Demirchyan

Thomas Charles Toghramadjian
Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia
St. Nersess Armenian Seminary, Armonk, New York, United States of America
thomas@stnersess.edu

Albert Makaryan
Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia
albert.makaryan@ysu.am

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the architectural definition of Yerevan as a modern capital city and the aesthetic definition of a Soviet Armenian literary method in the novels of Mkrtich Armen and Derenik Demirchyan. Armen's *Yerevan* (published in 1931 and banned in 1933) and Demirchyan's *New Monumental* (serialized 1931–1933) both center on the reconstruction of Yerevan and ideological dissension among the city's architects. Here, however, the resemblance stops. *Yerevan* eulogizes the disappearing landscape of pre-Soviet Yerevan in vivid, immediate detail presented within an elaborate armature of multiple dreams. *New Monumental*, meanwhile, approaches its subject matter within the formal and ideological constraints of the incipient Socialist Realist method and through the abstract settings of public debate, administrative process, and judicial procedure. The two works are examined within applicable theoretical frameworks concerning the structure of the "modern urban novel" and "socialist realist" novel, and with contextual reference to Armenian architectural and literary factions and debates of the early Stalinist period. Our analysis counters a recent critical tendency to read *Yerevan* as a polemical work or a straightforward fictionalization of contemporary architectural conflicts. Instead, both Armen's artistic intentions and his novel's problematic reception are best understood in terms of the subjective, dialogical character and innovative formal characteristics of his prose. Turning to *New Monumental*, we identify Demirchyan's use of the Socialist Realist "spontaneity-consciousness" dialectic, his faithful dramatization of historical events and debates, and his metaphorization of the city-in-progress and generational conflict among its architects into a statement on the present and future of Soviet Armenian literature. The article concludes with a reflection on Demirchyan's revision of *New Monumental* into an unfinished work titled *City*, and on the place of the "architectural novel" in the history of Soviet Armenian literature.

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Introduction

It is a paradox commonly remarked upon that Yerevan, the modern capital of the Republic of Armenia, is at once one of the world's oldest sites of continuous habitation and a distinctly "youthful" or synthetic city – even in comparison with other urban centers of the former Soviet Union, which likewise passed through the crucible of an "economic and cultural reconstruction of all life [having] no parallel in the history of mankind"[1]. A palimpsest of Urartian antiquities[2], classical and medieval Armenian history[3], alternating periods of Turkish and Persian rule[4], and a century of existence as a Tsarist provincial center, Yerevan provided neither a blank slate nor a definite foundation to the architects, planners, administrators, and artists who would define the city's new identity as the capital of the Soviet Republic of Armenia. Thrust into unprecedented prominence by a half-decade of genocide, war, and revolution, a drowsy provincial town of no more than 30,000 souls was transformed practically overnight into "an environment for utopian imagination" and a site for the "symbolization and reincarnation of lost values" – an emblem of the Communist future and a new center of the shattered Armenian world (Mkrtchyan, 2017, pp. 488–489).

The history of the construction of Soviet Yerevan under its chief planner, Alexander Tamanyan (1878–1936), has been repeatedly written, mythologized, and demythologized; we will present here only a few salient facts. Tamanyan, a distinguished Russian-Armenian architect of the pre-revolutionary era, arrived in Yerevan in 1919 to offer his services to the government of the First Republic of Armenia. He developed and presented a master plan for the capital city before fleeing to Iran following the Bolshevik takeover in November 1920. Tamanyan returned in 1923 at the invitation of the Armenian Communist leader Alexander Myasnikyan, and his general plan for Yerevan's reconstruction was approved a year later. The 1924 General Plan closely reflected Tamanyan's earlier development of a radial design for the city center, influenced by Ebenezer Howard's "garden city" concept; it also proposed outward expansion and significant infrastructural improvements to accommodate a projected population of 150,000 (Arustamyan & Bagina, 2020). The "national neoclassicist" style of the new capital, echoing Armenian medieval ecclesiastical architecture in its use of pink volcanic tuff, archways, and facades ornamented with stone carvings, was shaped by Tamanyan's collaboration with the architectural

[1] These are the words of Ernst May, who worked prolifically as an architect and planner in the USSR between 1930 and 1933. The continuation, however, is instructive: "It is equally true that a sober evaluation of all realities is accomplishing this reconstruction, and it should be obvious to any observer that in each successive stage, matters recognized as desirable and ideal are being consciously subordinated to matters that are feasible and possible within the limitations of the present" (Crawford, 2022, p. 285).

[2] Archeological studies of the Shengavit site within the modern city limits have revealed a notable center of Kura-Araxes culture, flourishing between the 4th and 3rd millennia B.C., distinguished by its defensive fortifications, abundant pottery, and underground granaries, and evidence of extensive private ritual culture (Simonyan, 2015; Simonyan & Rothmanm 2015). The history of Yerevan proper is considered to begin in 782 B.C., with the establishment of the city of Erebuni by the Urartu king Argishti I, son of Menua (Simonyan, 1983, pp. 19–20; Hakobyan, 1969, pp. 96–106).

[3] The earliest reliable attestation of the modern toponym is a reference in the *Book of Letters* (*Girk' T'ght'ots'*) to a delegation from Yerevan at the Third Council of Dvin circa 607 A.D. (Book of Letters, 1901, p. 151).

[4] Located at the nexus of contention between two Islamic empires, Yerevan changed hands 14 times over more than two centuries of Ottoman-Persian conflict from 1513 to 1735. As observed by the historian Yervand Shahaziz, these continual reverses were accompanied by increased taxation, massacre, plunder of homes, and forced displacement of the local Armenian population (Shahaziz, 2003, p. 106, 120).

historian Toros Toromanyan and by the contributions of Nikoghayos Buniatyan whom he invited to Yerevan in 1924 to serve as the city's first Chief Architect (Harutyunian, 2018, p. 29).

At the close of the decade, Tamanyan's architects were joined by Tiran Yerkanyan, Karo Halabyan, Gevorg Kochar, and Mikayel Mazmanyan. Graduates of Moscow's Higher Art and Technical Studios (Vkhutemas), an institution associated with constructivism and the Soviet avant-garde, they formed the nucleus of a rival school of "proletarian" architects who mounted an open campaign against Tamanyan's "outdated" garden-city plan, and "clerical" style. It should not be supposed, however, that they were opposed to national or vernacular forms as such. To the contrary, the architectural theorist Karen Balyan describes Halabyan, Kochar, and Mazmanyan as pioneers of national modernism: "Employing an arsenal of the latest (constructivist) forms, these Armenian avant-gardists created the first Armenian modernist architecture – founded, as they emphasized, on local vernacular architectural traditions which corresponded to articulated principles of "proletarian" architecture" (Balyan, 2020, p. 54).

Although the scale of Tamanyan's design would rapidly prove too small for the burgeoning capital, and his position became increasingly precarious with the approach of Stalin's purges – he was likely saved from arrest and trial only by his untimely death in 1936 – it was his vision that would ultimately define the architectural profile of the city center, as well as major planning decisions such as the placement of industrial districts (Mkrtchyan, 2017, p. 489; Simonyan, 1983, pp. 150–151). Among the best-known features of his architectural legacy are the modern-day Yerevan Opera (formerly the State Theater), the Government House in Republic Square, and the National Library on Teryan Street. The national aspects of Tamanyan's vision were marginalized after his death, as the capital's open orientation toward Biblical Mount Ararat was blocked off and its architectural profile became more explicitly totalitarian, with such additions as a 50-meter statue of Stalin overlooking the city from the east (Balyan, 2020, pp. 55–56).

The purge years also scattered the "Armenian constructivists." Mazmanyan and Kochar remained in Siberian exile until after Stalin's death, and Halabyan was saved from a similar fate only by the intervention of Anastas Mikoyan (Balyan, 2020, p. 55; Mediamax, 2012). The Soviet Armenian architectural avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, more fully expressed in the cities of Gyumri and Vanadzor, was limited in Yerevan to "rare samples" including the Builder's Club and Moscow Cinema on Abovyan Street, and residential complexes for rubber factory and hydroplant workers on Hanrapetutyan Street and overlooking the Hrazdan gorge (Balyan, 2020, pp. 55–56; Vartikyan et al., 2024, p. 202; Gasparyan, 2021, p. 44).

Seven years into the implementation of Tamanyan's first general plan, and at the height of contention between the Armenian national-neoclassical and proletarian-constructivist schools, there appeared two ambitious novels directly addressing Yerevan's reconstruction and ideological dissension among its architects. Mkrtich Armen's *Yerevan* was published in Moscow in 1931; two years later, the novel achieved a fateful distinction when it was banned from circulation by the Central Committee of the Armenian Communist Party alongside Yeghishe Charents' *Book of the Road*.[5] While Armen weathered this reversal,

[5] The three other texts singled out by the same November 14, 1933 party decision were an anthology including "chauvinist" works by 19th-century Armenian writers, an edition of the poems of Khachatur

he continued publishing in successive years[6], and resumed his literary activity after a term of exile in Siberia. *Yerevan* was excluded from the 1966 five-volume edition of his collected works, and the novel remained in obscurity until a notable reawakening of critical and public interest in the past decade. Demirchyan's *New Monumental* was serialized across three different periodicals between 1931 and 1933, with installments appearing in the final five issues of *New Direction* (*Nor Ughi*), the sole issue of *November* (*Noyember)*, and finally in the inaugural issue of *Ascent (Verelk'),* newly constituted as the official organ of the Soviet Writers' Union of Armenia. Never published in book form during Demirchyan's lifetime, *New Monumental* has remained a footnote to a long and prolific career capped by the two-volume historical epic *Vartanank* (1943–1946).

Both novels had roots extending deep into the previous decade. At the conclusion of *Yerevan,* Armen provides the dates 1927–1931 along with the itinerary "Yerevan – Moscow – Yerevan" (Armen, 2021, p. 269). Whole paragraphs in the book's early chapters are reproduced verbatim from his earlier short story "Zubeida," first published in 1926 (Armen, 1966, pp. 30–57). Meanwhile, the editors of the 14-volume collected edition of Demirchyan's works observe that the author began research for *New Monumental* in the early 1920s, diligently collecting and annotating newspaper clippings on architecture and urban development. The text itself was apparently composed between 1930 and 1931 (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 653–654). To properly contextualize both of these works, we must briefly turn to the formation period of Soviet Armenian literary culture and situate Demirchyan and Armen within these currents.

The 1925 proclamation of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party on "The Party Line in the Field of Literature" marked a consequential transition in Soviet Armenian literary culture, from a state of formative chaos to one of organized contention. Previously, an effective monopoly over organized literary activity had belonged to the Proletarian Writers' Union of Armenia, whose membership was reserved for writers of working-class origin. Despite programmatic references to appropriating the best of world cultural heritage, the formal deficiency and tedious content of the resulting productions – "everything finally collapsing into technicism, machine-worship, the cult of iron" – was readily apparent even to contemporary critics (Gasparyan, 1983, pp. 144–147).

In parallel, the first half of the decade witnessed energetic but abortive attempts to establish a Soviet Armenian futurist literature, a phenomenon most closely associated with the poet Yeghishe Charents and his period of so-called "leftist deviation" (*dzakh molorut'yun*). This period came to a decisive close when the first print run of *Standard*, a new futurist journal, was consigned to the furnace in July 1924 at the recommendation of Charents's friend and sponsor Alexander Myasnikyan (Nichanian, 2003, pp. 9–10; Beledian, 2009, pp. 390–439). It is highly relevant that *Standard*'s other two co-founders were the avant-garde architects Karo Halabyan and Mikayel Mazmanyan.

The 1925 Central Committee proclamation, while setting forth as its aim the eventual "hegemony of proletarian writers," introduced two principles that would prove, in the short term, highly beneficial for the development of Soviet Armenian literary culture. First, the Party refused to support "any single literary faction," instead declaring the necessity of "free competition between various groupings and currents." Second, the proclamation

Abovyan containing a "national-democratic" afterword, and an agricultural manual "propounding the advantages of the harmful theory of shallow tillage" (Decision of the Secretariat, 1933, p. 1).

[6] Armen's most popular work, the novella *Heghnar Fountain*, was published in 1935. He was sentenced to exile in 1937.

addressed the status of "fellow-travelers" – non-proletarian writers active before the revolution but sympathetic to its aims – recognizing their merit as "qualified 'specialists' of literary technique" and recommending a "cautious, measured, and considerate attitude" in their regard (The Party Line, 1925, pp. 2–3)[7]. There resulted an almost instantaneous reorganization of the Armenian literary landscape. The same issue of *Soviet Armenia* carried an announcement and apologia by Gurgen Mahari, proclaiming his departure from the Proletarian Writers' Association, castigating its representatives for their "persecution" of Charents, and proclaiming the formation of a new "October" Union of Proletarian and Peasant Writers [*banvor yev gyughats'i groghner*]. Promptly rechristened "November" and convened under Charents' presidency, this union included many of the finest Armenian writers of the period, including Axel Bakunts and the young Gyumri native Mkrtich Armen, whose early prose had appeared in the solitary issue of *Standard*[8]. In opposition, there remained the previous Proletarian Writers' Association (re-organized as the Proletarian Writers' Union of Soviet Armenia) under the leadership of Nairi Zaryan, the typesetter-turned-writer Vahram Alazan, and Charents' erstwhile allies Azat Vshtuni and Gevorg Abov (Gasparyan, 1983, pp. 158–175). With less fanfare and belligerence, the "fellow-travelers" – Stepan Zoryan, Vahan Totovents, and Derenik Demirchyan – went about organizing their own literary efforts, establishing the Union of Working Writers of Armenia under Demirchyan's presidency in 1927. As Demirchyan wrote in a 1926 letter to Totovents: "The Proletarian Writers proclaim that they are the only cultivators of Soviet Armenian literature, the Novemberists say the same...but I think that we will be proven right in the end" (Kalantaryan, 1977, p. 128).

Armen and Demirchyan, therefore, belonged to distinct camps in the contentious field of early Soviet Armenian literature, with the "Novemberists" distinguished by youth and formal innovation and the "fellow-travelers" by age, more traditionally realist prose, and the necessary caution attending their "tolerated" status. Both groups pursued their activities under the baleful eye of the Proletarian Writers, who would decisively prevail over the Novemberists in the period of furious denunciation that extended from the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 to the onset of the Great Purge. *Yerevan* and *New Monumental* must be read in context as distinct attempts to define a new Soviet Armenian literary method during a period of open artistic contention. Turning now to these works, we will dedicate particular attention to their formal and structural characteristics, considering how Armen's and Demirchyan's literary aesthetics relate to their thematic treatment of Yerevan's changing urban landscape and controversy over the city's architectural direction.

Dreaming the city: Mkrtich Armen's *Yerevan*

Armen's novel follows a young engineer, Arshak Budaghyan, who returns home after six years of education and practice in Russia to become one of two lead architects for the city of Yerevan. Budaghyan promptly enters into a rivalry with his counterpart, Gurgen

[7] The "fellow-traveler" category extended to Vahan Totovents and Zabel Yesayan, two notable Western Armenian writers whose autobiographical works *Life on the Old Roman Road* (1933) and the *Gardens of Silihdar* (1935) are among the undisputed classics of the period. Both would meet their deaths in Stalin's purges.

[8] Armen's association with "November" would prove consequential in his subsequent choice of subject matter, as it was at Charents' suggestion that he moved to Yerevan in 1925; the two shared an apartment for a period of several months (Armen, 1961, pp. 222–223).

Parsadanyan, stemming from their opposed visions for the city's reconstruction. The former is devoted to an ideal of "the East," associated with the old city's labyrinthine byways and "mud-plastered walls," subterranean baths and Persian tea-houses, his youth spent in the orchard district of Nork[9], and most of all his memories of Asmar, the steadfastly promiscuous and alluringly flabby Turkish widow who was the passion of his adolescence. Meanwhile, Parsadanyan, with the approval of the businesslike and parsimonious head planner Aram Gnuni, favors the "Western" approach of rationalization and bare utility summed up in the formula "four walls and one ceiling" (Amen 2021, 58, 92). After an initial period of straightforward grief and defiance against what he regards as senseless vandalism in progress, Budaghyan proceeds to divide his days and nights between delirious obsequies for the old East – all-night parties of dance, drinking and song to the accompaniment of *tar*, *kamancha*, *zurna*, and *dhol* in houses marked for demolition – and efforts to realize a vision of a new East, embodied in the ornate "Orient" communal apartment complex set against Parsadanyan's "Victory" development. As demolition supervised by the insinuating foreman Levon Grigorich usurps the Nork neighborhood home to Budaghyan's extended family, the architect becomes embroiled in a love quadrangle comprising himself, the absent Asmar who appears in dreams ever less distinguishable from the primary narrative, a girl named Sara whom he marries on a whim after entering a house at random, and his long-suffering cousin Marus who finally disfigures herself in a paroxysm of unrequited longing. Parsadanyan prevails in the clash of architectural worldviews, as the residents of the new "Orient" building complain that the oppressive tranquility of its gated interior gardens and stained-glass windows is drawing them away from the exterior world. Budaghyan considers himself defeated, but not his vision: "'Orient' is dead, long live the Orient!" (Armen, 2021, p. 266). The book concludes with the abrupt revelation of Asmar's unsuspected whereabouts and, finally, the collapse of the entire mirage: Budaghyan awakes to find the Moscow train arriving in Yerevan and disembarks affectionately to greet Levon Grigorich on the platform.

The course of events outlined above hardly comprehends the scope and content of Armen's novel, in which plot (i.e., *fabula*) is decidedly subordinated to narrative texture (*syuzhet*). By adopting a more structured approach, we may provide a fuller account of this strikingly episodic and iterative text, an assembly of dreamlike etudes that flower in turn from the invocation of a leitmotif, then fade to make way for new variations on the same theme.

Wirth-Nesher (1996) identifies four "environments" by which the cityscape is represented in the modern urban novel: the "natural," the "built," the "human," and the "verbal" (11). Crucially, in the urban context, these environments exist at a degree of remove from the protagonists and main action of the book: the "human environment," for instance "does not refer to the characters whose actions or thoughts constitute the main movement of the plot, but rather to human features that constitute setting, such as commuter crowds, street peddlers, and passersby" (Wirth-Nesher, 1996, p. 13). This intermediate distance relates to fundamental psychological aspects of modern urban existence, elaborated from Baudelaire to Simmel to Benjamin to Barthes: the estrangement of the individual amid the crowd and the constant prospect of encounter - or confrontation – with the other. Properly executed and properly regarded, these narrative planes must constitute more than background noise, "local color," or generic markers of the so-called hustle and bustle and frisson of city life. It has become a tiresome commonplace to observe that "the city itself becomes a protagonist" in a given work of fiction; it is nonetheless true that the novel, with its immense

[9] Formerly a separate village in the northeastern heights of Yerevan, Nork was incorporated as a district of the city in 1837. (Hakobyan, 1959, p. 231).

potential as a medium of investigation, construction, and reconstruction, is ideally suited to unify disparate strands of a given "urban text" into a coherent spiritual reality.

Insofar as they may be disentangled, let us attempt to describe the constructed, natural, human, and verbal environments of *Yerevan,* making it our objective not merely to convey the wealth and "thickness" of Armen's representation of the city at a transformational point in its history, but also to provide an analysis of the novel's characteristic devices and substantial themes.

The built and natural environments

Yerevan's urban topography, in Armen's presentation, consists of four basic domains: the city center with its public buildings, the opposing heights of Nork and Kond, and finally the sprawl of "Old Yerevan," drab and decaying but still alive with Persian baths, tea-houses, and hostelries. The most prominent natural features of Armen's Yerevan are the burning summer sun, the orchards and vineyards environing the city, and the Getar river, whose course down from the heights of Nork through the old city unites the book's primary geographical settings. [10].

Armen's description of Yerevan's natural and artificial features is marked by the frequent use of personification, whose most conspicuous effect is to dramatize the notion of a city at war with itself – or rather two overlapping cities at war with one another. Budaghyan, surveying the city from afar, perceives the following view: "In the center, a sparse few regular streets were marked out with one- and two-story houses. Beyond, there commenced a ring of narrow streets and mud-built houses, hemming in the center on every side, as though forbidding it to grow and extend." The center's wide paved streets, in turn, actively approach and demolish the old buildings and alleys standing in their way. (Armen, 2021, p. 4, 79). By way of contrast, Armen's references to the natural environment, climate, and season tend to create an effect of unanimity, of the city as a solidary living organism. A summer afternoon when Budaghyan, Parsadanyan, and Gnuni make a joint tour of work sites is marked by leitmotifs of the vineyards' audible cry and the soporific atmosphere of ripening fruit in the air. "And the wine-scented vapor entered the city on every side, intoxicating all the animate and inanimate objects in its way. Everyone in the city became drunk." Viewed on another sweltering summer afternoon, "the city, lost in heat and shadow, seemed to breathe." When Budaghyan calls Asmar's name aloud, his shout is "repeated by the evening and echoed by the night," as though they shared in his longing. Finally, of interest in this regard is a sequence in which the onset of darkness seems to proceed in stages, responding to cues from the human life of the city: "A bell sounded from one of the churches. With the first peal of the bell, evening began to fall. A policeman on the street brought his whistle to his lips. When he blew, the darkness became heavier. Under Arshak's room, on the first floor, the shutters of a workshop could be heard. The darkness became thicker still" (Armen, 2021, p. 46, 5, 241, 12–13).

The book's references to Yerevan's physical architecture naturally divide themselves into two categories: the real and the imagined. In the latter category we may safely

[10] The redirection of the Getar, which once posed a perennial flood hazard to Yerevan's inhabitants, was noted as a priority in the second phase of Alexander Tamanyan's general plan, and the river's course has since been diverted into artificial underground channels (Tamanyan, 1932, p. 34). The buried and attenuated river becomes a prominent motif in Aram Bachyan's 2020 novel *P/F,* a work that pays overt homage to *Yerevan.*

include the fictional “Orient and “Victory” apartment complexes, which have something fantastic about them even by the internal standards of the text; the image of the “Orient” building first comes to Budaghyan in a dream, the architects speak of their respective designs in terms of “dreams,” and the two projects constitute partial manifestations of more comprehensive visions for the future of the city, presented in detail toward the end of the novel (Armen, 2021, pp. 186-192, 120).

Despite his hero’s partiality, Armen is not at pains to accentuate the attractive features of Yerevan’s preexisting architecture. We encounter repeated references to “mud-built” and “mud-plastered” walls, “gray” expanses, and slums of windowless, “cubic” houses (Armen, 2021, pp. 25, 47, 125). The description provided in Yervand Shahaziz’s *Old Yerevan* (1931) very much coincides with the atmosphere of Armen’s novel:

> “As lovely as Yerevan is in its appearance from afar, it is equally ugly and unpleasant when viewed up close, with its torturous streets, congested mass of clay- and stone-hewn houses, and potholed squares constricted on all sides...The irregularly built houses with their flat roofs, mainly constructed of mud-brick and rough pebble, have maintained the character, appearance, and architecture of the period of Persian rule, and perhaps still more ancient times” (Shahaziz, 2003, p. 48).

Beauty, however, is in the eye of the beholder, and these unprepossessing environs hold an unmistakable charm for the narrator as well as the hero Budaghyan. One source of this appeal is a sense of mystery, of secrets withheld by labyrinthine alleyways and garden walls just high enough to prevent a view inside. Glimpses of these hidden interiors – a yard like a "verdant dream” visible through a crack in a wooden gate, white curtains, and part of a flowerpot glimpsed behind a blue or green-tinted glass of a rare window – assume an outsized significance (Armen, 2021, p. 47)[11]. Beyond its faithful recording of the city that was, *Yerevan* holds enduring interest as an account of cities that might have been. These alternative visions are captured in Budaghyan’s and Parsadanyan’s competing projects, as well as in the architects’ respective reveries about the city's face in decades to come. Of the two, Parsadanyan’s vision bears a closer resemblance to the urban landscape inherited from the Soviet period, defined by the broad streets and rational layout of Tamanyan’s center as well as stark expanses of prefabricated apartment blocks later erected for the needs of a rapidly growing population. The concrete, glass, and metal edifice of the “Victory” building stands out of place “as a guest arrived from cold and distant lands” in direct sunlight amid Yerevan’s low and tangled sprawl (Armen, 2021, pp. 243, 249). Brooding over his creation, Parsadanyan imagines vigorous young people in athletic clothes walking open squares and long asphalt-paved avenues, small and furnished rooms cooled by humming ventilators, the “death” of myriads of cluttering objects, and above all the tramway annihilating distance and opening the way to the outlying districts where the lights are as bright, the streets as wide, and the population as dense as in the center (Armen, 2021, pp. 248–253).

Recognizable and mundane as this landscape might appear to the contemporary reader, the utopianist character of Parsadanyan’s vision should not be overlooked. “I have followed those people,” he says, “for whom a spoon is nothing but a tool for eating, a chair is nothing but a tool for sitting, a cot for lying down, a window for letting in light, clothes for not catching cold. <...> I have emphasized the physiology of objects in all of my

[11] Shahaziz notes that a short-lived 19th century glass factory produced a brittle, low-grade product of a decidedly green hue (Shahaziz, 2003, p. 77).

designs" (Armen, 2021, 2023). All of these recalls nothing so much as Le Corbusier's dictum that "a house is a machine for living in"[12]. In evaluating Armen's insistent association of minimalist, functionalist architecture with the "West" it should be borne in mind that the years of the novel's composition represented a peak of European modernist influence in Soviet architecture, with Le Corbusier, Ernst May, Albert Kahn and dozens of their colleagues consulting, planning and lecturing in the USSR between 1928 and 1933 (Crawford, 2022, pp. 191–196).

Budaghyan's architectural vision presents a much stranger and more fanciful picture; the overall effect has been termed "retrotopian" (Leupold, 2024). The "Orient" building is totally devoid of exterior windows, echoing the walled sequestration of the houses of Old Yerevan and the inward-facing orientation of the city's Blue Mosque. The multi-terraced roof on which inhabitants take their nighttime rest traditionally is said to resemble the overlapping mass of houses on the hill of Kond. At the same time, an interior garden of poplar trees suggests the depths of the Hrazdan valley. In place of sinks and faucets, Budaghyan insists on a water basin in every room, to cool the air without electric ventilation (Armen, 2021, pp. 217, 76, 191).

The interiors and wall reliefs are extravagant to the point of absurdity, with Gnuni observing that decoration will account for a fifth of the entire cost; in contrast to Parsadanyan's "matchbox-like cupboards" and "fearsomely simple square tables," Budaghyan commissions wardrobes with arched doors resembling mosque entrances, hexagonal tables with spindly legs, and chairs like two large cushions sewn together (Armen, 2021, pp. 216, 260). Looking down from the highest point of his building, Budaghyan imagines vapor rising from a shaded city of pink stone and brick buildings, covered sidewalks, canals, and trees, and white trolleys ascending toward open-air schools on the once sun-scorched hills of Nork (Armen, 2021, pp. 246–248).

While recalling elements of Tamanyan's garden city design, the iconic use of pink tuff, and traditional stone reliefs, Budaghyan's vision also reflects certain ideas of avant-garde architects with whom Armen had collaborated on Standard. In a 1927 article promoting the "Parsadanyanist" principles of "clear geometric forms without ornament or embellishment" and "functional and rational directions [in] modern architecture," Mikayel Mazmanyan makes an observation strikingly reminiscent of Budaghyan's concerns and solutions. "In the north, [architects] seek out the sun, while we, on the contrary, take measures to protect ourselves against it. Accordingly, it is necessary to resort to the assistance of balconies, terraces, and various coverings, as well as to the flat roofs used for nighttime rest" (Mazmanyan, 1927, p. 3).

We may conclude this portion of our discussion with two summary observations. First, while describing the physical environment in considerable naturalistic detail, Armen endows it with qualities of subjectivity, obscure hidden significance, and fantastic malleability – all as though the city were the emanation of a single dreaming mind.

[12] Although the terms "constructivist" and "functionalist" do not appear in Armen's novel, it is worth emphasizing Parsadanyan's affinity with these currents. His hatred of domestic objects (pails, tea saucers, sugar-tongs, backgammon sets, egg beaters, even cradles and stoves) provides another clear indication. Compare Yuri Slezkine's account: "The Revolution's last and decisive battle was to be against 'velvet-covered albums resting on small tables covered with lace doilies.' ...Functional furniture was to be provided by the state (so as to liberate the workers from enslavement to things) ...Rooms were to resemble ships' cabins or train compartments. Everyone quoted Le Corbusier to the effect that 'whatever is not necessary must be discarded'" (Armen, 2021, p. 250; Slezkine, 2017, p. 341).

Second, Parsadanyan's and Budaghyan's respective visions are not straightforwardly analogous to historical factions in Soviet Armenian architecture. Instead, Armen creates extremes of Western minimalism and Eastern maximalism by separating and recombining elements of Tamanyan's national-neoclassicist reconstruction and principles of the contemporary avant-garde.

The human environment

Even as he captures the dense filigree of traditional relations characteristic of the city once ironically christened the "capital village" of Armenia, Armen innovatively transposes the modern themes of anonymity, the crowd, and the restless pace of contemporary urban life into a new Armenian setting. This latter aspect of *Yerevan*'s human landscape is most evident in the opening sequence, where Budaghyan descends for the first time into the city center. Travelling by car, (Armen instead insists upon a device whereby the buildings, telegraph poles, streets and crowds appear to be in frantic movement relative to the static observer-in-motion), Budaghyan glimpses two exchanges typical of the interpersonal reserve and "latent antipathy and the preparatory stage of practical antagonism" described in Simmel's classic essay on "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (Simmel, 2023, pp. 443–444). First, two professional men hurrying in opposite directions along the sidewalk cross paths and lurch side to side in concert for a brief eternity before managing to continue on their way. It is emphasized that both remain entirely serious, indifferent to the humor of their situation. The ambiguity of urban relations is more sharply accentuated in the following anecdote: "A man standing in a queue happened to step on another's foot, then, looking in the other's face, smiled as though beseeching forgiveness. The victim interpreted this smile in the following way: 'You see, my dear, what things I am capable of? However, this is not all, I am also fairly accomplished at breaking heads…" (Armen, 2021, p. 6).

In contrast to the center's anonymous tension, Nork and Old Yerevan present more intimate communal settings. On the night when Budaghyan arrives in his childhood neighborhood, the air itself comes alive with echoing calls. "Two minutes later, in all the orchards of Nork, from under the fruit trees and among the grapevines, the same call could be heard. *The engineer's come! The en-gi-neer!*" (Armen, 2021, p. 28). These voices promptly resolve into human figures as Budaghyan's relatives and their Armenian neighbors emerge from houses and darkened gardens to welcome him home. Old Yerevan, meanwhile, provides the backdrop for several set-piece scenes of close human observation, as Armen relates everyday procedures in a Turkish graveyard, a Persian bath, and a teahouse (*chaykhana*). The placement of the Armenian protagonist and his family in the northern heights and the depiction of everyday Muslim life in the city's southern purlieus reflect the actual demographic configuration of pre-Soviet Yerevan (Shahaziz, 2003, pp. 179–180).

The ethnic distinction between the inhabitants of Nork and Old Yerevan relates to an evident disparity in Armen's narrative approach to the two districts. The scenes in Nork are presented from an uncomplicated third-person omniscient perspective, with minimal "discourse" or narrative intervention. Armen freely enters the consciousness of characters other than his protagonist: for instance, the architect's cousin, also named Arshak Budaghyan, yearning for a lemon as he struggles to emerge from an alcoholic stupor. Meanwhile, in the Old Yerevan scenes, Armen conspicuously guides the way, raises questions, and confines himself to externals of appearance and dialogue, as though

reader and narrator alike are invisible observers navigating an exotic and unfamiliar world.

> The red gravestones slumber in the yellow heat of the day. There is nothing to disturb the heavy stillness of the air and the monotonous landscape of red gravestones. But look carefully, and you will notice a white chador among the thousands of graves... Who is she? A young Turkish widow who has searched out her husband's grave from among the thousands of headstones and is now crying over it... But is she really crying? No, she has knelt on the flat stone and, head inclined, she is looking down, unblinking. [...] Regard her an hour later. She is still seated in the same position. See her two hours later – the same." (Armen, 2021, p. 62).

In this case, the narrator's distance serves a plain immediate purpose, as the reader must necessarily wonder if this female figure is the elusive Asmar. However, the same marked "externality" holds in the scenes in the baths, as we see the proprietor with his worry-beards, sense the presence of "*Usta* Ali," and "Suleyman *agha*" by means of dialogue, and regard the bathing Osman *agha* with only external clues as to his thoughts and state of mind (Armen, 2021, pp. 65–69).

Armen's self-consciously anthropological posture in these settings, a distinctive blend of distance and fascination, is not merely a consequence of the implied reader's Armenian nationality. It is not incidental that the scenes of the Turkish graveyard, the bathhouse, and the *chaykhana* are demarcated by the novel's best-known refrain – "venerable old Yerevan is dying" – and that each scene concludes with an image of the new city overtaking the old. The documentarian impulse in evidence in this section of the book arises directly from Armen's concern for aspects of the town already slipping into oblivion and obsolescence. The reader of *Yerevan* may be surprised to learn that the Persian bathhouse culture so lavishly described had all but vanished in the decades preceding the book's composition. The city's major baths in the late Tsarist period were the "European," operated by the engineer K.E. Hovhannisyan, the "Russian" advertised by a Madame Samanova, and a third belonging to one Hambardzum Yeghiazaryan; "the Persian *hamams* had, by the first years of the 20th century, practically ceased to exist; only poor '*hamam*-like' remnants were left." (Hakobyan, 1963, p. 360). If we look more closely, Armen himself shows a clear awareness that the transformation he describes is already well underway. At one point, we find a description, in the present tense, of the city caravanserai in its organic relation to the Blue Mosque and central marketplace: "On these days [of pilgrimage], the caravanserai presents a vivacious picture. All of its cells are packed full with occupants, the chimneys smoke, the smell of cooking seizes the entire neighborhood, and here, until late at night, there is a clamor of innumerable human voices." Only two pages later do we discover that the caravanserai no longer exists; it has been paved over to make way for a new avenue, and only weathered bits of rubble recall its former location (Armen, 2021, p. 77, 79).

The many threads of *Yerevan's* human landscape are brought into harmony in an ambitious and memorable scene in which Budaghyan throws a party at his neighbor Gabo's house on the eve of its scheduled demolition. The "enthusiasts of Old Yerevan," as they are called, arrive unbidden in an endless procession: Armenian youths dressed in white with caps in hand, Armenian girls with double braids, Turkish boys with shaved heads and Turkish girls with slender features, Persians, heavy-limbed *tar* and *kamancha* players, tambourinists with pockmarked cheeks, a saturnine *zurna* and drum trio from

Gyumri, middled-aged men with knife scars on their faces from long-forgotten fights, voluble tradesmen... and all proceed to sing in turn of their days, their work, their hopes and the weary premonition of their disappointment, the meager diversions of their evenings, and the impending death of the city they have known, until the rooster calls a third time, dawn breaks, and they file out into the street to meet Levon Grigorich and the wrecking crew standing outside (Armen, 2021, pp. 139–151).

The verbal environment

On the day of his arrival, Budaghyan remarks on a film poster for *Battleship Potemkin* partially torn away to reveal a previous advertisement for *Tarzan in the Jungle*. The superimposed posters create "the incomprehensible and perhaps meaningless word 'Taryomkin,'" which "impressed itself strongly in Budaghyan's mind, because it was the first word he had encountered in Yerevan" (Armen, 2021, p. 7). This absurd portmanteau becomes a signifier of Budaghyan's conviction that the new constructions of Parsadanyan and Gnuni constitute an incongruous and irreconcilable addition to the underlying urban landscape, and of the ambivalent position of a head planner reliant on two architects with opposing ideas. Dumbfounded by a vista of new stone buildings rising from a tangle of alleyways, clay walls, and small houses to form the outline of a broad and regular street, Budaghyan breaks in on Gnuni's monologue on land acquisitions and the state of the cement supply to bellow "shut up, Taryomkin!" (Armen, 2021, pp. 54–55). He continues to address Gnuni as "Taryomkin" for the remainder of the book, to the latter's bemusement and mild vexation.

Perhaps a more conventionally poetic constituent of *Yerevan*'s verbal environment is the repeated interpolation of song in traditional Eastern forms. These leitmotifs tend to initiate and accompany sequences culminating in visions of the old city giving way to the new. In the first of three short nocturnes beginning with the formula "Night...silent night...," as Budaghyan wanders the back alleys of Nork, we hear the unattributed lines: "*Asmar!.... You have torn the sleep from my eyes. Your pitilessness has made the Zangu to cry, Asmar, Asmar!*" As the song proceeds, (*your answer has made the orchards to yellow... your baseness has made the night to wear black*), it transpires that Budaghyan is singing a dimly remembered melody "composed some years ago by an unsuccessful poet." Suddenly, he realizes that the poet in question was himself, and that his feet are tracing the way to Asmar's old house. Arriving, he opens the door and finds nothing inside: "The house was no more. Only the outer wall was left standing, like a stage decoration..." (Armen, 2021, pp. 23–25). Although the words of the song are Budaghyan's own, their narrative presentation creates the impression that they are conveyed to him by his surroundings – the night and the familiar neighborhood – until they finally break through his improbable – or rather, dreamlike – amnesia.

A more ambitious sequence along similar lines begins with two verses that resolve into the scene of an *ashugh,* saz in hand, singing an Iranian ballad in a city *chaykhana*[13].

You are the rose of Gulistan
You are the woe of the young
You are the jewel of the flower-land
Zubeida Zubeida

Who will pluck of your roses?
Who will die of your woe?
You are not of human birth

[13] For further information on Yerevan's traditional café performance culture and its decline in the Soviet period see: (Saroyan, 2024, pp. 217–226).

His song forms the backdrop for a scene of Armenian and Persian laborers taking their evening rest. The narrator leads the reader to a back room where the Turkish landlord plies a covert trade in wine and spirits. However, on the other side of the door, instead of the dim inner sanctum described, we encounter piercing daylight, the ring of hammers and human voices, and a three-story stone building "rising from the floor of the demolished room" (Armen, 2021, pp. 70–75).

It is worth remarking that Armen's 1926 story "Zubeida," from which this song and café scene derive, proceeds to a very different conclusion. Its simple plot concerns a young Turkish laborer, Ahmed, and his love for a politically conscious Persian schoolgirl who shares her name with the fairy-queen of the ballad. Thrown out of the house for refusing an arranged marriage with an aged merchant, Zubeida finds Ahmed, and they live happily ever after in his small room in the workers' quarters of the Blue Mosque. While "Zubeida" clearly foreshadows *Yerevan* through allusions to the city's demolition and reconstruction, it exhibits little of the novel's ambivalence toward this transformation (Armen, 1966, pp. 31, 34, 53). *Yerevan*'s central theme, as characterized by the author, is the notion that "old Yerevan's *content is being demolished along with its form*" (Sargsyan, 1932a, p. 3). The irrecoverability of old "content" once deprived of its original "form" is a recurring concern of the novel. Moving house, Budaghyan's uncle Alexo realizes that his furniture and possessions, piled into a cart, have changed their essential nature; the sink, for instance, reveals an unsuspected bluish color in the light of day. He considers that even if he were to unpack the cart and put everything back in its original place, "the room would be filled with the unfamiliar breath of alien objects" (Armen 2021, 158, 165). This insight constitutes a clear rejoinder to Gnuni's assertion that "if tomorrow you prove that all this was what we needed, we will build everything over again" (Armen, 2021, p. 58).

"Zubeida," in contrast, presents an account of old content preserved and enriched by new forms. Persian and Turkish women at a Communist club put aside their headscarves only because the director refused to allow men to enter. Protected by the new Soviet order, Zubeida flees from patriarchal coercion at home – and makes her new life at the mosque. Initially reluctant to marry Ahmed before he "becomes a man" – that is, earns a decent livelihood – Zubeida resolves that she will be the one to "make a man of him" by sharing the benefits of her literacy and education (Armen, 1966, pp. 40, 56–57). In each instance, old ways survive even as new conditions ostensibly subvert them.

Zubeida also provides a naive contrast to *Yerevan* in its treatment of dreams. In the story's climactic scene, Ahmed wakes, dresses, and leaves his room in the middle of the night because he dreams that Zubeida is knocking at his door, saying that she will be his wife. He promptly finds her on the street, and she tells him, "Let's go home" (Armen, 1966, pp. 50–51, 57). It is as though he has emerged from a dream into another dream; the dream and reality have become one. *Yerevan*'s more obtrusively oneiric structure, a long succession of evanescent visions and ventures into dim landscapes of the past culminating in the blank light of day, paradoxically arises from the fact that *there is always an awakening*. The entire novel might be called an attempt to realize a single suggestion: "Why not turn dreams into life, and life into a dream?" (Armen, 2021, p. 202). Nevertheless, this statement, by its very nature, recognizes the distinction and dissonance between the two.

Criticism

The Central Committee's prohibition of November 14, 1933, refers simply to "Mkrtich Armen's novel *Yerevan*, which preaches local nationalism and calls for an orientation toward the feudal East" (Decision of the Secretariat..., 1933, p. 1). With the book's late readmission into the Armenian literary canon, a simple question presents itself: Is this charge, on a strictly descriptive level, true? Perhaps more to the point, do the contraries of nationalism and socialism, or even East and West, truly provide the best framework for describing the concerns of the text and its apparently uniquely problematic character?

Strikingly, the critical controversy over *Yerevan* bore practically no relation to the book's "national" orientation, and touched only in passing upon the protagonist's nostalgia for the "feudal East." An April 1932 review in *Grakan Tert* by Khoren Sargsyan is overtly concerned with the book's indifference to socialist ideology; a passage describing the evaporation of thoughts relating to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as a preliminary stage of Budaghyan's creative work draws a predictable rebuke. The senior critic goes on to complain that "there is not so much as a word in *Yerevan* about the struggling, creative masses." In a *pro domo sua* essay on the same page, Armen is correspondingly at pains to distinguish himself from his protagonist (Sargsyan, 1932a, p. 3). We will miss a great deal, however, if we interpret this exchange in ready-made terms, as a nonconformist author falling afoul of some definite "Communist Party line." *Yerevan* belongs to an era in which the form of the coming "proletarian literature" was still (at least ostensibly) a matter of open contention, and the life-and-death stakes of artistic deviation were not yet fully apparent. Sargsyan (1891–1970) was no zealous young commissar, but rather a representative of an aesthetically conservative, politically socialist, pre-Soviet intelligentsia that had reacted strongly against "decadent" or avant-garde currents in turn-of-the-century poetry and prose from the utilitarian standpoint that "the Armenian writer must apply his abilities in a manner that provides some good to society" (Petrosyan, 2007, p. 177). Armen, along with his fellow "Novemberists," represented a more formally innovative school, which refused to conceive of art narrowly in terms of its social or didactic function. As we will see, this exchange between critic and author represents not a clash of "orthodoxy" and "unorthodoxy" (still less of "nationalism" and "socialism") but rather a debate over the place of realist aesthetics in the new Soviet Armenian literature.

Sargsyan objects particularly vehemently to the novel's final pages, where the entire narrative is revealed to have been a dream – and even the waking Budaghyan promptly gives way to the figure of the author himself, departing his office with the ink not yet dry on the final page of his manuscript. "We are not trying to deprive Armen of his right to dream," he writes. "We only protest against Armen's taking refuge under the shield of a dream extending over dozens of pages, giving free rein to his caprices, disdaining reality..." (Sargsyan, 1932a, p. 3). Notably, Sargsyan faults Armen for his "idealism" and "Machist [i. e., empirio-criticist] epistemology." Setting aside the up-to-date party terminology, this could very well be the work of a cantankerous *Mshak* or *Luma* critic inveighing against an anthology of Symbolist poems at the dawn of the 20th century. In his opposing essay, "How Novels Are Written," Armen makes little effort to defend himself against charges of individualism, self-indulgence, and transgressions against literary realism. To the contrary, he states that "readers will have noticed that my *Yerevan* is not a *realistic* work" declares that "realism, taken alone, has already become an obsolete form for the development of literature," and claims that the novel's every detail is purposefully

susceptible of three interpretations, corresponding to the "symbolist," "romantic," and "realistic" planes of his synthetic artistic method (Sargsyan, 1932a, p. 3).

Nonetheless, he avows: "I accept realism. On the contrary. *Realism must be developed and deepened.*" Armen's proposal for a "deepened," "proletarian dialectical" realism in contrast to the "transitional," "contradictory," "bourgeois" realism of the past contains an arresting slogan – "down with the image!" By this, Armen refers in the first instance to simile and metaphor, which he says reduce description to "approximation," thereby failing to provide "a scientific representation of the phenomenon." This insistence on the irreducible particularity of the thing described reflects the heritage of both Naturalism and Symbolism[14] – two currents flowing from opposite directions into the syncretic pool of literary modernism. What it does not reflect is the "great literalism, extremism, and rigidity" with which the Socialist Realist novel adopted the 19th century model of the "typical" positive hero who "should exemplify moral and political (or religious) virtue, and should show the 'way forward'" – to such an extent that the formulaic use of epithets and plot structures create a pronounced effect of "deindividualization" (Clark, 1981, pp. 46–47).

Sargsyan's rejoinder in the next issue of *Grakan Tert* makes fascinating reading, as he cites Lenin, Gogol, and Pushkin in defense of realist conventions, and Andrei Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and Dostoevsky (disapprovingly) in his effort to demonstrate that Armen's novel and commentary represent a farrago of modernist literary tendencies rather than anything especially "proletarian" (Sargsyan, 1932b, p. 2). Armen's essay, despite a certain incautious *ex cathedra* quality, had seemed to represent the beginning, rather than the end, of a search for a distinctively Soviet literary method. Sargsyan, however, considers the question entirely resolved: "The proletarian method is dialectical materialism itself." To judge from the priors on display in his two articles, Sargsyan means this less-than-unambiguous predicate to refer to the "critical realist" tradition of commentary on contemporary social issues through the portrayal of typical characters in typical situations. Aside from a passing jab ("such surrealism is no more Marxist than Budaghyan is a communist"), Sargsyan makes no further reference to the ideological content of Armen's novel (Sargsyan, 1932b, p. 2). The debate has passed onto purely theoretical ground.

What we witness unfolding in the pages of *Grakan Tert* is not a single author being held to account for his critique of Yerevan's reconstruction or any other aspect of the Soviet political order, but rather the narrowing of the formal potential of the Soviet Armenian novel itself. To use the dichotomy beloved of Marxist critics, Armen attracted hostile attention not for the ideological *content* of his work, but for its provocative *form*. Once the novel had been singled out for criticism, it would prove easy to glean evidence of "substantive" ideological deviations as well. As noted by the late Soviet Armenian critic Hrachya Tamrazyan (himself no sympathizer of *Yerevan*, which he considered to represent a "dubious direction," "theoretical errors," "alien influences," "a confusion of different styles" and so on), Armen considerably facilitated his own enemies' work by declaring that the novel was full of hidden meanings (Tamrazyan, 1984, pp. 411–412).

Yerevan as a nationalist text?

As we have attempted to demonstrate, *Yerevan*'s controversial place in the history of Soviet Armenian literature, and the purported grounds for the book's prohibition,

[14] As Gyula Illyés wrote in 1936, "the great secret of symbolism is that the poets have publicly slain one word: the word 'like'" (Vajda, 2007, p. 27).

should not tempt us to read it as an inherently polemical text. Nonetheless, Armen does take a controversialist approach to a freighted issue of enduring interest: the transformation of a provincial town bearing the architectural and demographic imprint of Persian and Turkish rule into a Soviet metropolis and the capital of the Armenian people. Khachatryan (2018) contends that *Yerevan* directly reflects a contemporary clash between "national" and "proletarian" architectural schools, identifying Budaghyan's "Eastern" ideal with the pursuit of a distinctively Armenian vernacular architecture, and, by extension, with Alexander Tamanyan, who "made every effort to preserve Yerevan's national profile, adopting as a foundation the best exemplars of medieval Armenian architecture" (58). This interpretation is somewhat reinforced by Khoren Sargsyan's initial review, in which Arshak Budaghyan is described as "waging a struggle against constructivism," implicitly placing him in Tamanyan's camp (Sargsyan, 1932a, p. 3). Nevertheless, both as history and as literary analysis, Khachatryan's reading seems incomplete.[15]

On the historical side of the ledger, an issue can fairly be taken with the word "preserve." Tamanyan was, by all accounts, acutely conscious of the value of ancient and medieval Armenian cultural heritage, petitioning two successive governments for laws on the protection of historical sites and presiding over the "Committee for the Preservation of Antiquities" before and after his period of political refuge in Iran (Petrosyan, 2015; Simonyan, 1983, p. 145; Tamanyan, 2000, pp. 134–136, 215–219). However, after centuries of invasion, foreign rule, and economic and cultural stagnancy, Yerevan's "national profile" was more in need of definition than preservation: "Before construction, Yerevan's two-story clay or earth houses located on narrow and winding streets could hardly provide...signs or spaces for the self-identification of Armenians with their long-lasting civilizational legacy" (Mkrtchyan, 2017, p. 489). Tamanyan, moreover, was hardly a conservationist in his approach to Yerevan's existing urban fabric; while Budaghyan laments that "every time a stone of old Yerevan falls under your pickaxes, it is tantamount in my eyes to smashing a statue of Apollo or Venus," we find Tamanyan remarking with the utmost equanimity that at necessary stages in the evolution of modern European capitals "the most valuable districts have been demolished to the foundations, even buildings of six to eight stories" (Armen, 2021, p. 120; Tamanyan, 1924, p. 20). Not even medieval Armenian churches were held sacrosanct in the realization of Tamanyan's vision; while the destruction of the Church of Peter and Paul to make way for the Moscow Cinema may have represented an unavoidable concession to an anticlerical regime, it was at the chief planner's personal insistence that the site of the Gethsemane Chapel was chosen for the State Theater (Abrahamian, 2023, p. 35).

Budaghyan's "East," both symbolically and concretely, is far from national in content. Grasping for inspiration, the architect wishes that Asmar would come, bringing in her train "all of the architects of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan." (Armen, 2021, p. 183). When Budaghyan mourns aloud for the vanished city, he recalls the primarily Islamic milieu rendered in the book's "Old Yerevan" sections: "Where are they, the listeners of Hafiz-Zade, the customers of Alakper Hasan-oğli, the devotees of Zubeida?" (Armen, 2021, p. 113).

[15] In a lecture titled "Writing Against Stalin's Western City," another reader of the book identifies Tamanyan not with Budaghyan, but rather with his rival Parsadanyan – a dubious conclusion in light of the apparently constructivist basis of the latter's relentless minimalism (Leupold, 2024). This alone may illustrate the difficulty of reading Armen's novel as a political-architectural critique or a straightforward fictionalization of contemporary events.

The Old Yerevan, whose funeral march echoes through the pages of Armen's novel, constitutes not the haven of an immemorial indigenous culture, but rather a haphazard accretion of more recent Turkish and Persian influences, synonymous with centuries of invasion, massacre, deportation, and capricious, oppressive, and incompetent[16] rule. The very peculiarities of the urban landscape lovingly evoked are the physical vestiges of a population living in perpetual fear and uncertainty. Shahaziz describes the windowless houses, decentralized neighborhoods, and mysterious interior gardens concealed behind nondescript walls explicitly in terms of the ordinary people's efforts to preserve their livelihoods from the sardar's coffers and their wives and daughters from the harem (Shahaziz, 2003, pp. 159–161). In this sense, *Yerevan* reads as a doggedly, even obnoxiously *antinationalist* text, subordinating the hopes represented by a new Armenian Soviet Republic to its fixation on the tawdry legacy of a foreign interregnum and its factitious identification of a particular local identity with a vague, undifferentiated, and idealized "East." Why, of all places, should Yerevan – the most ancient of Armenian cities and the final refuge of a people only lately eradicated from their demographic heartland in the Ottoman Empire – vie with "Samarkand and Tashkent" to become a cultural lodestar and gateway of entry for "millions of comrades" from "Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan and India?" (Armen, 2021, p. 129).

We are, however, on the point of sharing quarters with several critics who, disregarding Armen's own voluble warnings, have already stumbled into the pitfall of too readily identifying the author with one of his characters. The novel itself anticipates the above critique, although it is stated more in terms of socialist ideology and contemporary necessity than national grievance. "Do you know," Parsadanyan retorts, "that what you call the East is the culture of feudal rulers new and old, of aghas and beks, shahs and sultans?" (Armen, 2021, p. 126). Against Budaghyan's resistance to change, Gnuni points out that "here, under our noses, tens of thousands of people are wandering homeless or piled on top of each other in dark, musty dens" (Armen, 2021, p. 58). The implicit reference is to the crowding and death toll from famine, disease, and exposure that accompanied the mass influx of Armenian Genocide refugees from Ottoman Turkey. Budaghyan's fervid orientalism is therefore presented discursively rather than polemically – not as an authorially privileged viewpoint but as one of multiple antitheses. One implication of the uncanny physical resemblance between Budaghyan and Parsadanyan, frequently underlined in the text, is that they represent two halves of a divided consciousness – and therefore neither is a complete or fully realized figure. Put differently, both are, in the end, absurd.[17]

Moreover, we cannot assume that Armen is preaching an irenic middle way between the orientalist and constructivist visions represented; such a mishmash of unreconcilables is precisely the absurdity underlined by the novel's "Taryomkin" motif.

Where does this leave us? The elegiac quality of *Yerevan* is not a rhetorical tool employed in the service of any particular agenda or political critique, but rather represents a sense of the tragedy inherent in the passage of time and the conviction that nothing – regardless of its origin or usefulness – should pass unaccounted for into oblivion. Now as

[16] Yerevan's water supply, now famous for its purity, remained notoriously pestilential throughout the entirety of the Turco-Persian period, with recurring cholera epidemics largely accounting for a centuries-long flatline in population growth (Shaziz, 2003, pp. 53–57; Hakobyan, 1959, pp. 264–268).

[17] It appears that the Budaghyan whom we have come to know over the course of the novel is absurd even to the "real" Budaghyan arriving on the train, who promptly "sets aside all the foolishness of his strange dream" and passes into other thoughts (Armen, 2021, p. 268).

then, the generous breadth of Armen's vision, its ecumenical sweep and refusal of any final resolution represent artistic luxuries not cheaply afforded to the Armenian novelist. With the merest reference to the Yerevan Khanate serving as ready fodder for the risibly pseudohistorical notion of "Western Azerbaijan" and expansionist claims on the Republic of Armenia, Armen's novel, with its affectionate commemoration of a city shaped in the image of Persian and Turkish rule, is perhaps more dangerous today than it ever was in 1933. It is to the credit of the Armenian reading public and literary culture that the book's immense merit has not been obscured once more by tests of ideological purity.

"Schematizing" the city: Derenik Demirchyan's *New Monumental*

New Monumental takes as its protagonist Mikhail Georgevich Melikyan, a middle-aged architect of significant experience and repute, who is tasked with constructing a major public building referred to in the text as a "monumental." Following an idyllic afternoon at Lake Sevan meditating on his elusive vision, Melikyan arrives home in Yerevan to find he has been singled out by name in an article criticizing "clerical-monastic" tendencies in contemporary architecture. It soon transpires that the article is the work of a circle of ambitious students, led by one Aghasyan and committed to a purely "proletarian" architecture, which they define as a "functional and rational" approach. (Demirchyan, 1982, 60). The students convene a public discussion at which Melikyan attempts to defend his position, but he struggles to express himself and comes off the worse in front of a hostile crowd. Attempting to tender his resignation the next day, he is interrupted by a telephone call announcing that a worker has died due to faulty scaffolding at the monumental construction site. During the subsequent trial, Melikyan is accused by witnesses of neglecting his workers' safety and well-being, upbraided by the judge, held financially liable, and given a suspended sentence. Contrite and spiritually broken, he departs in self-imposed exile to Tbilisi, where the sight of soot-discolored white marble buildings in the industrial Didube district, "anachronistic and risible," "graceless epigones of old Georgian architecture and feudal strongholds," awakens him to the conflict between his aesthetic tendencies and ideology (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 153). Meanwhile, in Yerevan, the chief planner, Gasparyan, assigns the students a significant building project of their own, but decides to recall Melikyan to complete his "monumental."

The novel proceeds toward its conclusion without any clear vindication or apotheosis. Melikyan redeems his previous error by risking his life to warn a group of workers about an impending danger, but feels newly disgraced after receiving another judicial reprimand for insufficient vigilance against a circle of "wreckers" who have hoarded building materials and sabotaged his project. The students' competing project is a modest success: "well-lit," "simple," "comfortable," and "attractive," but "simply not what Aghasyan's group had expected; it lacked that sublimity, flight, and creative fire which they meant to soar upward like a magnificent precipice." The students' building is acclaimed as "a step toward the new monumental," but falls short of any ideal (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 234–236). With his own monumental, still unfinished, Melikyan returns to Sevan, accompanied by Aghasyan and Gasparyan. The chief planner describes how the city will be transformed by hydroelectric power from the lake. Melikyan meditates that this great work must belong to the new generation: "The old will fall, remain behind, and of it only one note will remain, sounding out faintly behind the new." (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 239–240).

In contrast to the daringly individual literary method on display in *Yerevan*, *New Monumental* is the work of a cautious author highly responsive to the cultural and political status quo. The novel, manifestly a product of its time, must be approached within the context of the conventions of the early Stalinist period and the artistic method which would soon receive the official designation of "Socialist Realism."

In her landmark monograph *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Katerina Clark reconstrues the apparent naivety and crude schematism of the Socialist Realist oeuvre as a relatively sophisticated and evolving set of variations on a single "master plot" whose central concern is not class struggle as such, but rather the dialectical resolution of "consciousness" (i.e. ideology and theory) with "spontaneity" (i.e. instinct, zeal and action) (Clark, 1981, pp. 15–16). This master plot takes two significant variations, or "biographical patterns": one "positive" (a proletarian hero coming to increasing consciousness, as in Gorky's *Mother*), and the other "negative," involving "an intellectual or bourgeois hero whose psychological and intellectual makeup puts him out of step with the new age." (Clark, 1981, pp. 44–45).

New Monumental corresponds to both of these blueprints. Considering himself a "sincere friend of the proletariat," the protagonist Melikyan is *consciously* committed to the revolution and never *consciously* deviates from Communist ideology (Demirchyan 70). He is nonetheless irredeemably burdened by the instincts of his upbringing and prior career in service to the bourgeoisie; despite his guilt over the accident and awakening to the shortcomings of his classicism, he still cannot bring himself to listen attentively to his workers, and he admits at the end of the book to still "loving the old" (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 237).

At the same time, in his creative turmoil, he appears more ideologically "conscious" than the youthful architects and their sponsors, who blithely presume that an edifice's "ideology" will arise automatically from its function. Therefore, Melikyan must supplement his overdeveloped "consciousness" with "spontaneity," or, in the terms preferred by the text, turn his sights from "theory" to "practice." This lesson is imparted by his relative Barekyan in Tbilisi, a hydraulic engineer newly invigorated by constant outdoor work leaving no room for brooding contemplation: "Here are my projects, my diagrams, my books, my papers – my theory. Now they are all left here, scattered on the ground, on the tables. Practice has picked me up and carried me away like a flood." (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 156). Meanwhile, the novice architects led by Aghasyan are distinguished by their youthful energy, zeal, and organically proletarian instincts, but require further theoretical grounding. Nonetheless, as they repeatedly argue, practice itself provides the best education – they are allowed to spring into work, providing passable results for the time being, with the certainty that the future belongs to them.

It must be noted that, despite the evident depth of Demirchyan's research and aside from the lifelike dialect variations in his Armenian characters' speech, *New Monumental*, on its surface, might have been set anywhere in the Soviet Union. Aside from a few stray references to Abovyan Street and the Nork district, the text is practically devoid of local geographic signifiers. Possibly by design, it is impossible to determine where the building site exists in relation to the city planning office, where the office exists in relation to Melikyan's home, where the public debate takes place, and so on.

If the modern urban novel is characterized by "spaces that fuse public and private, that are uneasily indeterminate: coffee houses, theaters, museums, pubs, restaurants, hotels, and shops" (Wirth-Nesher, 1996, p. 20), Demirchyan favors impersonal public

venues (municipal offices, auditoriums, courtrooms), occasionally alternating with secluded retreats (Melikyan's home office arrayed with books and artwork representative of his classicist inclinations, the smoke-filled rooms where the devious "wreckers" conspire over caviar and champagne). There is a more than incidental resemblance between these settings and theatrical scenery; Demirchyan first found distinction as a playwright, and it might be remarked that *New Monumental* would lose little in adaptation for the stage. The novel's "human" and "verbal" landscapes are likewise narrowly tailored to the advancement of the plot: newspapers print architectural polemics, Melikyan's workers protest their ill-treatment, and members of the public convene at lectures and trials to hiss and applaud. Hardly, if ever, do we glimpse the city occupied in its everyday life, insensible to the protagonists' existence and concerns. This is to say that the book *does not contain* the distinct external landscapes characteristic of the "modern urban novel." Demirchyan's treatment of the growing city is, so to speak, more topical than topographical. Consequently, our inquiry must begin from the historical foundation rather than the finished edifice of his work.

New Monumental and Tamanyan's People's House

While practically ignoring the physical landscape of early Soviet Yerevan, Demirchyan's novel faithfully reconstructs the debates that would come to define the city's 20th-century profile. The editors of the *Collected Works* suggest that Melikyan is a cipher for Alexander Tamanyan and that his unfinished "Monumental" stands for the State Theater, the modern-day Yerevan Opera (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 661–662). There is abundant evidence to support this view. In July 1926, Tamanyan invited Buniatyan as well as two other classically inclined senior architects, Hovhannes Kachaznuni and Gabriel Ter-Mikayelyan, to submit competing designs for the "People's House," as the theater was originally conceived (Dolukhanyan, 2015, p. 133). The chief planner ultimately assumed the project himself; after six attempts, he settled on a circular colonnaded structure faced externally with local granite and internally with marble, which he described as an attempt to unite the principles of the Roman Colosseum with the 7th-century Zvartnots Cathedral (Abrahamian, 2023, p. 43).[18]

In Tamanyan's characterization, "the theater is designed monumentally, in correspondence with Armenia's natural environment and popular art" (Tamanyan, 1932, p. 26). Although Demirchyan's description of Melikyan's "monumental" is intentionally vague, the parallels are evident enough. The architect is inspired by public buildings of the antique world, "filled with and completed by the psychology of the masses," and emulates classical architecture with a façade of imposing pillars. In his conception, 'the monumental leaves the impression of being firmly and eternally attached to the earth," but is also defined by its sublime upward flight: "a building of marble and cloud" (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 10–11, 125, 50, 150).

There are still more apparent parallels with Tamanyan's difficulty in bringing the project to completion, as the People's House became a target of criticism from his constructivist rivals and of discouraging pressure from above; at one point, funds were withheld on condition that an enormous statue of Lenin be placed atop the edifice (Mkrtchyan, 2017, p. 491; Abrahamian, 2023, pp. 41–42).

[18] This information comes from the architect Mark Grigoryan's recollection of private conversations with Tamanyan. As Demirchyan and Tamanyan were personally acquainted, it is quite possible that the novelist was privy to similar discussions.

Although the ground was soon cleared for the project, with private orchards [19]. Moreover, the Gethsemane chapel and surrounding Armenian cemetery were cleared away in the late 1920s, construction proceeded slowly, and the State Theater's finished appearance remained indeterminate until years after Tamanyan's death. At the time of Demirchyan's writing, proletarian resistance to Tamanyan's vision for the People's House was at its height; on March 6, 1930, fourteen Armenian architects, engineers, and artists published a letter in Tbilisi's *Novaya Vremya* newspaper titled "In place of the People's House, let us build a forge of proletarian culture" (Abrahamian, 2023, pp. 36–37; Mediamax, 2013).

Whereas Armen stylizes and recombines opposing tendencies in Soviet Armenian architecture to create his own antitheses of "East" and "West," *New Monumental* much more closely accords with the actual terms of contemporary debate. The national-neoclassical style pioneered by Tamanyan and Buniatyan was condemned precisely as "clerical" or "monastic" (Balyan, 2020, p. 54). The positive principles of Demirchyan's young "proletarian" architects match those of their real-world analogues; Aghasyan's references to "modern architecture proceeding along functional and rational lines," and "clear geometrical forms without ornamentation" are directly quoted from an article by Mikayel Mazmanyan (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 60; Mazmanyan, 1927, p. 3). We might proceed further in this direction – an argument could be made, for instance, that Melikyan bears a closer resemblance to Buniatyan than to Tamanyan – but there would be little analytical purpose or novelty in the exercise. There is no doubt that the contents of *New Monumental* are "torn from the headlines." More pressing is the question of what artistic purpose is served by such a direct fictionalization of current events.

Afternoon of an architect

Despite the somewhat affected vigor and enthusiasm of specific passages, Demirchyan's novel, as a whole, is decidedly melancholy in tone. Much of this follows from the protagonist's age and compromised position. Seeing the outpouring of support merited by the young architects' modest success, Melikyan considers that imperfection on his part will hardly be accepted so charitably: "And him? He was alone. He was trying too. Moreover, if he, in turn, did not succeed completely, would he possibly be greeted by the same warm caress of enthusiasm?" As his own building slowly rises, Melikyan's "despondency and doubt" give way to nothing better than resignation. "He reconciled himself to the thought that it would not be an epochal work in its entirety. A fragment, a suggestion, a fleeting breath of the future monumental whose image was in his and the public's imagination" (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 236–237). But the book's melancholy extends further than a single individual contending with his own limitations and failures. By the end, no real synthesis of "theory" and "practice" has taken place; there is no one figure in whom these categories are successfully united. Even as the engineers Barekyan and Mirakyan inspire Melikyan with their consuming dedication to everyday work, he is startled by their narrow perspective, impatience, and interpersonal indifference bordering on "selfishness" or "cruelty" (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 125, 159).

The old is defeated, not constructively converted into new forms; Melikyan's impending obsolescence is taken as a given, and there is little suggestion that he even has a role to play in the formation of a new generation of architects. The landholder who

[19] One subplot of *New Monumental* concerns a landowner's attempts to prevent or at least delay the uprooting of his orchard for Melikyan's project.

beseeches Melikyan to spare his orchard is rebuffed and finally driven to despair, threatening to kill his own children. He is portrayed neither as a villainous kulak nor as an innocent victim; Melikyan simply reflects that "he has been defeated" and "must be sacrificed." There is an unusually tragic image of the "corpses" of trees cut down to make way for the monumental: "headlong, arm outspread, contorted in pain" (Demirchyan, 1986, pp. 48–49, 137). Above all, the hoped-for edifice remains a phantom still out of reach; so much debate, physical labor, sacrifice, and creative struggle yield only one unremarkable building and another unfinished and irredeemably compromised. These ambivalent touches, which provide much of the book's artistic value, may also account for its lack of contemporary recognition. As Clark notes, novels of the Stalinist period had to be "optimistic," portraying the Marxist-Leninist "resolution of all conflict between individual and collective good" through heroic narratives that served as "repositories of official myths" (Clark, 1981, pp. 109, 10). Why, it may be asked, did Demirchyan, otherwise so sensitive to his critical environment, neglect the most obvious requirement of all – to provide a heroic, stirring, optimistic, exemplary story?

In early 1931, just as the first installments of *New Monumental* were on the press, the literary organ of the Proletarian Writers' Association of Armenia dedicated several pages to a survey of Demirchyan's 35 years of literary activity to date. The piece begins with a vague and sophomoric overview of the "petit-bourgeois" milieu from which Demirchyan emerged (the term appears ten times in the first fifteen sentences), approvingly, if patronizingly, notes a "surprising transformation" in the author's post-revolutionary style (although his later works are still "not free from errors"), and concludes: "Derenik Demirchyan will finally be able to stand on the platform of proletarian ideology when he comes to comprehend the essence of Marxist philosophy" (Mkrtchyan, 1931, pp. 46–47, 52). This treatment appears even more ungracious in light of Demirchyan's own charitable approach to the Proletarian Writers' efforts. This was most apparent in the literary debate over "schematism," a term which came into vogue in the late 1920s and rapidly became a catch-all for the deficiencies of proletarian literature to date: overt propagandism, cliché, slipshod language and formal indifference, the substitution of generalities for detailed observation, and so on. In a 1930 article discussing schematism and its causes, Stepan Zoryan identified one of the most consequential symptoms: "Our contemporary literature, along with the aforementioned deficiencies, lacks (for the most part) local distinctiveness, local scent and color…Many works give the impression of having been translated from another language" (Zoryan, 1930, p. 4).

While one of Demirchyan's recent works was among those Zoryan criticized as exhibiting "schematist" tendencies, it is evident that the term first and foremost implicated the crude agitprop and formal unsophistication of the rank-and-file Proletarian Writers. Demirchyan's response in defense of schematism – a term that had been used almost exclusively in a derogatory sense, including by the Proletarians themselves – appears motivated less by wounded amour-propre than by a desire to identify positive developments in the last decade of Soviet Armenian literature. He begins by observing that a term so widely bandied about requires further definition: "if it is a snake, let's run by all means, but why not understand what kind of thing it is first?" In the accepted usage, he says, "schematism" refers to the "dry, diagrammatic, skeletal, depiction of real life." It is defined not by the use of "typical" characters as such – a pillar of the realist tradition advocated by Zoryan himself – but rather by Soviet writers' difficulty in creating fully-realized figures representative of contemporary experience. Demirchyan attributes this difficulty to the unprecedented pace of social change. For decades, he writes, "everyday

life was defined by the static relations of 'the rich and the poor.' Social groups were clear; types were 'typical.' Moreover, now, in the whirlpool of contemporary life, even those 'permanent' types, even those 'men of the past' seem to be moving and hastening on to their fateful ends." Writers who might once have labored for years over works of burning contemporary relevance now had to contend with unfinished manuscripts growing obsolete literally day by day. Demirchyan goes on to mount a more affirmative defense of "schematism," arguing, for instance, that if works of fiction had come to resemble pamphlets or newspaper editorials, it was only because there now existed a recognizable group of people of solely ideological preoccupations, making it" impossible for an author to have them speak about anything else." Passing on to the inevitable question of the definition of "proletarian realism," Demirchyan criticizes what he terms the static "photographic" realism advocated by Zoryan, opposing it to a "dialectical" realism concerned with the momentum, direction, and flux of society. He compares the former approach to describing passengers on a train or the bolts of a ship, while ignoring the vessel's course (Demirchyan, 1930, pp. 4–5).

Demirchyan's defense of schematism helps to account for some odd qualities of *New Monumental* that hardly suggest a gifted and mature writer drawing upon a decade's worth of research: the scarcity of distinctively local motifs, the abstraction of the city landscape, the narrow "topicality," and the pasteboard aspect of many characters representing ideological rather than human types. [20]

Beyond accounting for the work's various deficiencies, this critical context helps to inform an appreciative reading of this flawed but essentially serious novel. We may take as a starting point a remark of Melikyan's that echoes Demirchyan's own comments on the challenges of contemporary literature: "Life moves forward more rapidly than style" (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 68). Let us consider, broadly, the book's material. Acrimonious debate over the foundational principles of a new proletarian method which nobody can successfully define or employ, a veteran artist struggling to maintain his relevance and good standing, youthful enthusiasts with uncompromising slogans and impatient zeal outstripping their still-undeveloped talent – it takes no penetrating psychological insight to realize that *New Monumental* is a statement on the Soviet Armenian literary culture of the prior decade, and that Demirchyan, with judicious self-criticism, has cast an aging fellow-traveler in the leading role.

While Demirchyan's concessions to proletarian schematism significantly shape the novel's formal texture, its most compelling ideas concern the preservation and adaptation of traditional forms within a new political, economic, and cultural order. Inspiring are the passages in which Melikyan rises to defend his artistic views, contending at once with rejoinders from his opponents and with his own internal monologue as he recognizes, for the first time, various points of uncertainty. Two formulations are especially relevant to both architectural and literary aesthetics. First, Melikyan says, "style must arise from the element of the masses – from the land. The conditions of Arkhangelsk, India, and our own country are not the same. Our tuff – that is the element that we must plan, shape, and heap into our constructions. Furthermore, tuff, comrades – is style." Later, he defends his use of archways reminiscent of medieval Armenian

[20] This flatness extends even to Melikyan, whose inner life is occupied entirely by professional and ideological concerns. He never worries, for instance, how his fall from grace might affect his wife and daughter, who are briefly introduced early in the novel and never mentioned again.

churches in the same terms. “It is tuff which provides those arches. Our tuff predetermines our style. We do not have much iron or reinforced concrete. Tuff is what we have today” (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 68, 128). A parallel suggests itself to the Armenian language – rugged, intractable, locally distinct, and above all, ancient – which has been repeatedly and memorably compared to stone.

This reading will appear less tendentious if it is borne in mind that the register of the Eastern Armenian literary language (i.e., the interrelation of the “civil language,” local dialects, borrowed words, and so on) was a question of enormous stakes during this same period. In the coming years, Yeghishe Charents’ use of Classical Armenian locutions in the *Book of the Road* would provide one pretext for his condemnation, arrest, and execution as a nationalist. Defending himself at a moment of supreme danger in July 1934, Charents chose to deliver a lecture on, of all subjects, “Derenik Demirchyan and tendencies in the development of our literary language,” in which he draws an explicit parallel between the respective poetic registers of Hovhannes Tumanyan and Vahan Teryan and the architectural styles of Tamanyan and Mazmanyan (Nichanian, 2002, pp. 27–37; Charents, 1967, p. 323).[21] Demirchyan’s own language, with its alternation between local dialect (in dialogue) and standard modern Armenian thoroughly leavened with Russian borrowings (in narration), constituted a safe middle way for Charents to valorize. Demirchyan’s reference in *New Monumental* to the definitive influence of a native element suggests – however faintly – a persistent admiration for writers who cultivated a more unalloyed, autochthonous, and classical register.

More self-evidently literary is Melikyan’s somewhat abstruse excursion on the origin and use of artistic symbols. “Do you want a monumental?... Then you are dealing with the suggestive properties of styles and images... Do you recall Ibsen’s self-invented symbols – the wild duck, the white horse? Are they effective? Perhaps. Nevertheless, how much more effective Hauptman’s bell is! Do you remember? Why the bell? Because it is old, deep, and full of popular meaning. The traditional function of the bell – that is, the source of its suggestive character. Now, can the pitiful boxes you propose be equally as suggestive to the masses? They cannot.” (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 67–68). Again, we encounter a hint of internal doubt. Despite Demirchyan’s own deference to current trends, including the use of mechanical similes – a crowd bursting into applause like a factory beginning to rumble at the turn of a crank, autumn arriving on the Ararat Plain like a train beating over the tracks – he articulates an evident nostalgia for more immemorial wellsprings of aesthetic experience (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 73, 148).

Afterlife: Derenik Demirchyan’s unpublished *City*

New Monumental met an evidently lukewarm reception; it may be sufficient to note that the novel never saw book publication except in posthumous anthologies of Demirchyan’s complete collected works. Later critics have generally neglected to comment on the novel; it has never been the subject of a dedicated study, is not mentioned in Hrachya Tamrazyan’s standard *History of Soviet Armenian Literature*, and in a collection of 1977, articles dedicated to the centennial of the author’s birth we find only one parenthetical reference to “the journalistic [*hraparakakhosakan]* novel *New Monumental*” (Aghababyan, 1977, p. 20). In terms of Demirchyan’s own artistic progression, the book represents a soon-discarded tendency toward schematism, which, however significant as literary history, did not lend itself to works of great merit.

[21] Unfortunately, the development of this comparison was not recorded by the stenographer.

One circumstance, however, lends the novel an enduring fascination. Demirchyan continued to labor over the text for twenty more years, beginning almost immediately after the original serialization of *New Monumental* and finally unifying the accumulated fragments in a 1951 partial draft. Judging from the proportions of the main manuscript, which encompasses only one of three outlined "phases," the completed novel might have approached a thousand pages in length. Along with its larger scale, the new version introduces major revisions to the content. Melikyan, rechristened Adonts and more advanced in age, is no longer merely an eminent architect but the chief planner for all of Yerevan – his identity with Tamanyan is now unmistakable. The novel's outline matches the course of Tamanyan's own late career, with Adonts initially losing ground to his youthful "proletarian" opponents, regaining preeminence. [22] Overseeing their work, and finally ceding the arena with his death at the outset of Part III. While preserving the "monumental" plotline, with a similar attacks on Adonts' "clerical-monastic" style," Demirchyan widens and sharpens the architectural controversy to address questions of city planning, including church demolition (Adonts heads the Committee for Preservation of Antiquities), urbanization of the northern orchards, the role and quantity of collective apartments, and the alleged architectural subordination of the outlying industrial districts to the "petit-bourgeois" garden-city center (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 247, 289, 294, 358, 368, 372, 518–522).

The most striking change of all is in Demirchyan's thematic treatment of Yerevan itself. In *New Monumental*, the city – effectively collapsed into a single edifice – is reduced to an abstract metaphor for a socialist society and culture still under construction. The Yerevan of *City*, a much broader panorama in much sharper relief, is represented by a deft superimposition of past, present, and future landscapes that rivals, and at times even resembles, Mkrtich Armen's modernist poetics. At the outset of the novel, Adonts reflects that the new city he had traced in pencil "once stood like a mirage upon the old. A mirage even now. However, day by day, it was the old that was becoming a mirage. The echoes of the old and the reality of the new were already beginning to course through the streets of the city" (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 246). This conceit of the city as two overlapping mirages, with phantoms of the past flitting amid the scarcely embodied visions of a creative mind, is fully realized in a memorable sequence in which a wealthy man reduced to homeless poverty, the Urartu king Argishti, and the vanished 19th-century author Khachatur Abovyan all wander bewildered past the Moscow Cinema, standing on the ruins of a church, standing on the ruins of a pagan altar, on an old street newly christened with Abovyan's name (Demirchyan, 1982, pp. 376–381).[23]

Had the work been completed, *City* would have constituted an achievement unique in Armenian literature – a full-scale historical epic of the construction and growth of Soviet Yerevan, to stand alongside Armen's more lyrical treatment of this process in its early stages. Demirchyan's age is the most apparent reason for the novel's incompletion; he was already 74 years old and had only four more years to live when he consolidated his

[22] This corresponds to the beginning of the second phase of Tamanyan's general plan in 1932, which coincided with the official declaration of Socialist Realism and accompanying principle "socialist in content and national in form" (Balyan, 2020, p. 54).

[23] This memorable scene owes something to Axel Bakunts and his 1932 story "Sunset on the Province," describing the metamorphosis of Astafyan (Abovyan) Street and a solitary wanderer disoriented by the city's rapid change. Bakunts was at work on the biographical novel *Khachatur Abovyan* when he was condemned and executed 1937.

manuscripts into the partial draft of 1951. However, considering Demirchyan's formidable industry and three decades of preoccupation with the same theme, we should, perhaps, seek another explanation. "Do you want a new city?" Adonts angrily exclaims to his opponents: "Then give me an empty field!" (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 435). The point, which concerns the impossibility of building without regard to preexisting structures, might be applied to Demirchyan's creative labors as well. With all its appealing novelty, *City* still labors under the weight of its original material, including the hackneyed and basically extraneous subplot about a conspiracy of saboteurs. The revision also takes the fatal construction accident and the ensuing trial from *New Monumental*, episodes that are conspicuously out of place in the first movement of a work with an entirely different dramatic structure. Considering that the finished portion of the manuscript ends here, it may be inferred that these very difficulties contributed to Demirchyan's loss of momentum.

Surveying a vista of earthen houses and black tuff buildings, with the distant noise of dogs, roosters, carts and cars rising from a maze of straight avenues and winding streets under the twin peaks of Ararat on the darkening plain, Adonts and the young architects see before them "a city straining to be built, to emerge from its prior state." (Demirchyan, 1982, p. 256). Reading *City*, we are left with only the foundation, blueprints, and fragments of a monumental work which failed, in the end, to emerge from what had come before. Enough remains, however, to provide abundant justification for further study of this neglected work and new insight into the creative process of one of the foremost Armenian writers of the 20th century.

Conclusion

The brief vogue of what we have termed the "architectural novel" in Soviet Armenian literature was not confined to *Yerevan* and *New Monumental*, but also encompassed works such as Mkrtich Armen's *The City on the Hill* (1930) and Stepan Zoryan's *The White City* (1930). Decades later, in Gegham Saryan's verse novel *A Miraculous Generation* (1950) and Yuri Yerznkyan's popular film *The Song of First Love* (1958), we once again encounter the figure of an idealistic young architect overseeing the demolition of his own family home and neighborhood. *Yerevan* and *New Monumental/City* occupy a central place on this broader constellation, as ambitious works with a sustained focus on questions of architectural aesthetics, concerned with the development of Yerevan as a whole.[24]

Considering the privileged place afforded in the Socialist Realist genre to the so-called "production novel," it is surprising that Soviet literary culture did not engage more closely with questions of city planning and urban architecture. Particularly in Demirchyan's treatment, the new city landscape or urban edifice becomes a fruitful, if overdetermined, metaphor for the new socialist society under construction. However, if Russian or other Soviet national literatures contain clear parallels to *Yerevan* and *New Monumental* – that is, novels featuring architects as their protagonists and placing at issue the construction of a major city or a part thereof – they have eluded our own survey, and their identification is a task which must remain for future researchers. How to account for this evident lacuna? Katerina Clark provides a helpful answer:

[24] *The White City* and *A Miraculous Generation* concern the work of architects in rural communities, while Armen's *The City on the Hill* describes the growth of a single neighborhood of Western Armenian refugees and repatriates on the small height of Dava-Yatagh on the southern outskirts of Yerevan.

> "From the thirties on, most novels of the Stalin period were set not in the complex modern cities of Moscow or Leningrad, but in a model provincial microcosm – a town, factory, kolkhoz, construction site, or army unit far removed from the advanced urban centers. In such an environment, 'nature' could play a greater role in the lives of the protagonists. However, above all, reality could be 'simplified.' Some of its harsher aspects, such as the oppressive, hierarchical state bureaucracy, could be made to seem more benign in a setting where the officials would be few and the gap between their status and that of the ordinary people less" (Clark, 1981, p. 109).

In this context, the Armenian architectural novel is a unique phenomenon that requires its own explanation. Such an accounting must begin with Yerevan's exceptional significance as a site of real and symbolic reincarnation for a people lately brought to the brink of total annihilation and separated from the physical foundations of their culture. Coinciding as it did with the aspirations and demands of a new Soviet order, this process of national reconstruction involved a profound collision of traditionalist and utopian visions. Yerevan was further distinguished as a special case by the remarkable degree of authority invested in Alexander Tamanyan, an architect of no innate Communist affinities, who embarked upon a city plan initially developed in advance of the Bolshevik takeover and cultivated a national-neoclassical architectural style of manifestly religious antecedents. Such a course could not fail to provoke ideological resistance, which, in the event, took the form of an original school of Armenian constructivist architecture representing its own synthesis of vernacular and modern elements.

The height of this architectural debate coincided with a period of exceptional literary activity extending from the proclamation of "free competition" in 1925 to the institution of Socialist Realism as an official artistic method in 1932. Even as writers such as Armen and Demirchyan drew inspiration from the controversial process of Yerevan's reconstruction, they were themselves undertaking to define a new Soviet literary method whose prescribed "realistic" and "proletarian" qualities had yet to assume a settled form. In the resulting novels, *Yerevan* and *New Monumental*, we witness both the potential of a Soviet Armenian modernism whose future was rapidly being foreclosed, and an incipient Socialist Realism endeavoring to reconcile 19th-century literary technique with a dialectical conception of social progress in an era of unprecedented change. This implicit drama of artistic struggle and adaptation lends an additional layer of significance to works whose enduring value is assured by their depiction, at a decisive juncture, of the changing countenance of the new and ancient city whose fate has become inextricable from that of the Armenian people.

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Information about the author

Albert A. Makaryan
Dr. Sci., Professor, Head of Chair of History and Literary Theory
after Academician Hr. Tamrazyan
Yerevan State University
1, Alex Manoogian St., Yerevan, 0025, Armenia
ORCID: 0000-0001-5111-5412
Scopus AuthorID: 58601287200
e-mail: albert.makaryan@ysu.am

Thomas Charles Toghramadjian
Master of Theology, Research Fellow
Yerevan State University
1, Alex Manoogian St., Yerevan, 0025, Armenia
St. Nersess Armenian Seminary
486, Bedford Road, Armonk, New York, 10504, United States of America
ORCID: 0009-0009-6207-6960
e-mail: thomas@stnersess.edu

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