



The Bells: From Poe to Sardarapat

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THE BELLS: FROM POE TO SARDARAPAT

JAMES R. RUSSELL

Was it a dark and stormy night? No, but at least it was on a crisp and serene one, in autumn, and the scene is an old wooden house shaded by huge, gaunt trees. The nervous, overweight boy from the big city was uncomfortable with his four suburban cousins, with their healthy, athletic roughhousing and clean, wholesome, all-American good looks: their parents had not circumcised them and had rejected the antique language, the prophetic faith, and the tribal old-new land. But in the living room the Franklin stove crackled, all was bright and warm, and his aunt and uncle had put on a newly pressed record, “All The News That’s Fit to Sing” (Elektra Records, 1964)—a topical irony, since *The New York Times* boasted then, and still does, that it offers all the news fit to print. In that little, bright room in the ghoul-haunted woodland of suburban Philadelphia the boy heard for the first time Phil Ochs’ song “The Bells”, with its intricate guitar work and gorgeous melody. The music seemed part of the happy scene in every way the boy already knew he most definitely was not, yet he loved the music.¹

For something else entirely was at work as the song wove its enchantment. Ochs’ setting of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem suggested to him that music and words could be extremely close, closer than he had thought, not melody and lyric as two together but the *same thing*—and the subject of the poem, the bells, and the densely alliterative poem itself leapt across the boundary between sound and sense, between the apparently arbitrary semantics of the language we use and the sounds we employ to express meaning. And that is the sixty-four-dollar question, isn’t it? Is there anything more than an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified? We receive the universe as information; and evaluate, relay, experience much of that information through a linguistic medium. The very diversity of languages would indicate that the relationship of names to things is indeed arbitrary, at least most of the time. Only most of the time, that is, since one can introduce into the issue two other factors: the idea of music and the musicality of language, and a specific category of words, the onomatopoeic ones—the ones that mimic a non-

¹ This article began with my graduate course at Harvard in the Fall term of 2011 on modern Armenian romantic and revolutionary poetry attended by two brilliant students, Ainsley Morse and Christian Millian, then a presentation to the Boston area Armenologists’ round table at my office, and a lecture at the invitation of Barbara Merguerian to the Armenian Library and Museum of America, Watertown, MA, in December 2011. I am grateful to these students and colleagues who listened, reacted, and suggested. The shortcomings of the study are all my own.

linguistic sound in nature associated with a named object or act. So, a bell rings. An English-speaking child hears **ding-dong**, and Poe hears tintinnabulation. A Russian's *kolokol'chiki* go *dzin'-dzin'*. In Hebrew a ringing bell *me-tsaltsél*, and a the *ghoghanj* of a clanging Armenian *zang* can be *dzendzgha*-voiced, or a child can sing *De, zngə znga im zangak* "Hey, go ding-dong, my bell!" What if a word really were related to what it describes? Coleridge once mused, Were a man to dream of Paradise and then wake, holding a flower from there, yes, and what then? What then? This essay will probe some of the "What then."

At eleven I did not think all that out quite the way I've put it here, but I felt it, which is an essential first step if you take a poem seriously; and the grail of philology glimmered on the horizon, that line in the distance that melts away as one questing poet, or scholar, or madman approaches it. As time passed, and one learnt more of Poe and Ochs, there was a vindication of sorts, besides; for one discovered over time that Poe himself was no paragon of conventional virtue. And he was fascinated by the Near East and by my ancestral and sacral language, Hebrew. He was neither cheerful nor wholesome: he was as hung up a person as ever lived in the whole wide universe. I found out that his musical interpreter, Philip David Ochs (December 19, 1940–April 9, 1976), was a Jew whose youth in the Midwest was marred by anti-Semitism. He wasn't cheerful or wholesome either, and his fate was somewhat like that of Poe, whose poem he set to music in that unforgettable song. Ochs became a drunkard, believed he was possessed by somebody else's soul and that he himself had died, and then he hanged himself. My assimilationist relatives perhaps constructed their lives the way they did because they recoiled from what Salo Baron has called the lachrymose paradigm of Jewish history. My uncle had been in an army unit that liberated a Nazi death camp, and I believe he wished to camouflage his children, to protect them from anti-Semitism. But their sterile picture of a homogeneous American identity was conceived also, I think, in a self-loathing that makes life a lie. Armenians can also have an unhealthy obsession with the Genocide, as though that were all there was to the nation's history— though the issue of denial makes that giant episode unfinished business. There is no worldwide and ineradicable hatred of Armenians comparable to anti-Semitism, though; and that is perhaps why even with a cognate lachrymose paradigm there is no self-hatred. I remember my cousins now simply as graceful; their parents, as decent though chilled by life; and for their music, like Joseph Brodsky in his retrospective poem at forty, I will give nothing but thanks. Yet "The Bells" has Armenian echoes, and these will indeed be an alarum, plunged into the terror and murder of the Genocide, of the awful reality of being human that poets face head on, that I try to escape, that you try to escape, from which there is no escape.

I have heard the bells of Poe echo again, in a poem by the Western Armenian Rupen Sevag, with the tolling grim; and the poet's fate, hideous. And then I heard them in the verses of two Eastern Armenian poets: Yeghishe Ch'arents' and Paruyr Sevak—one murdered by the police at forty, the other killed when he was scarcely older, in a suspicious road accident. It seems that it is dangerous to be a good poet, dangerous to be a visionary, dangerous to hear bells. It seems that society often exacts a price from such people.² A scholar is also a person and as he grows older he can shed some of his armor and tell about the motives for what he has chosen to study, though his candor cannot compromise his practice of his art, the integrity of his method. He does this partly out of respect for the decent opinion of mankind. But paradoxically he may do it partly out of indifference to that opinion, as well. Because as Colin Wilson put it, "age has one advantage; it teaches one that the opinions of other people are not really very important; death is so much more real."³ So my project here is to suggest that at certain points, poets find a door between dimensions through which signifier and signified walk and shake hands. I want to assert that their doing so has a moral content: it is the exercise of a divine gift that may bring down the wrathful envy and enmity of their fellows, but it is work on behalf of the Platonic virtues, the good, the true, the beautiful. The beauty of the mainstream of culture belongs as much to the misfits and outcasts who made it and who are its guardians even now, as to the world they have given it to. And among us, those who cannot keep the bells from ringing in our heads and who have not the good sense to be silent, to stop creating and to stop protesting, are the drunkards and the drugged, the perverts and the mad, and the Jews and the Armenians. Everybody, that is, in Federico Garcia Lorca's bacchanal.

² One recalls this interchange in the movie "Easy Rider" (1969) between Jack Nicholson and Dennis Hopper:

George Hanson: They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to 'em.

Billy: Hey, man. All we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.

George Hanson: Oh, no. What you represent to them is freedom.

Billy: What the hell is wrong with freedom? That's what it's all about.

George Hanson: Oh, yeah, that's right. That's what it's all about, all right. But talkin' about it and bein' it, that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Of course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em.

Billy: Well, it don't make 'em runnin' scared.

George Hanson: No, it makes 'em dangerous.

³ Colin Wilson, "The Return of the Lloigor," in H.P. Lovecraft and divers hands, *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House, 1990), p. 359 (originally published in *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*, 1969).

1. EARLY CHIMES: POE

The diary of Mary Louise Shew, friend and benefactor of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe (January 19, 1809–October 7, 1849), contains an account of the genesis of his last, great poem “The Bells” in May 1848. The two were sitting in a conservatory overlooking a garden. Poe complained that he had to write a poem, but lacked inspiration. The sound of church bells filled the air, but they merely irritated his frayed nerves. He said, “I dislike the noise of bells tonight, I cannot write, I have no subject, I am exhausted.” Shew then wrote down a line and passed it to him: “The bells, the little, silver bells.” Poe composed a stanza, then lapsing into a nearly comatose state. She wrote again: “The heavy iron bells”—and at this he jotted down two more stanzas, which he attributed to her. He had to be put to bed, and a doctor was summoned. Poe was nearly insane, and physically close to death. But he survived to finish the poem begun that day, as well as “Annabel Lee,”⁴ in 1849; he died later that year, at forty.⁵ “The Bells” was printed posthumously in *Sartain’s Magazine*.⁶ On his last night on earth Poe was found in the street in Baltimore, in somebody else’s clothes, raving, calling out the name “Reynolds.” The latter is the name of the explorer whose project of an expedition to the Antarctic had given Poe the idea for his novella of Antarctic exploration, supernatural weirdness, and doom, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. The last line of this work portrays a maelstrom, a cataract, and a bottomless chasm out of which a giant shrouded human figure rises, white as snow—perhaps Poe experienced some similar, dire vision in his last moments, but the ending of *Pym* is more the synopsis of a cosmology than merely a shocking finale. (In the last months of his life Yeghishe Ch‘arents‘ was to write—nearly a century later—a poem he titled “Ulalume,” after Poe. It is translated in the Appendix here, and describes immersion in the vortices of an inner sea.)

The America of the first half of the 19th century was entranced by the metaphysical, by the mysteries and arts and languages of Ancient Egypt and the Near East—this was before the Civil War left in its wake the hard, cold, materialistic practicality that became the hallmark of the nation’s culture for some time to come.⁷ So the narrative of the antebellum *Pym* is replete with

⁴ This is the credal ballad of Humbert Humbert in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, with its kingdom by the sea for which lonely characters in other of his novels also long.

⁵ Wolf Mankowitz, *The Extraordinary Mr. Poe* (New York: Summit Books, 1978), pp. 215, 242.

⁶ See Plate 1.

⁷ Greil Marcus addresses the cultural issue generally in chapter four, “The Old, Weird America,” of his *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997); Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) stresses the wartime divide; and John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), addresses the specific feature of aegyptomania. This

relics of the Ancient Near East: the explorers discover in the Antarctic the Hebrew word *tsalmawet* “valley of death” of the 23rd Psalm inscribed in Ethiopic letters; and the birds of the southern wastes cry *Tekeli-li!* recalling the cryptic Aramaic words of doom on the wall in the book of Daniel: *Mene mene tekel upharsin*, “You have been weighed and found wanting!” It is important here to note that Poe relies upon the cryptic aspect of these words to bear his message, not their lexical, formal meaning: that is, what matters is their *sound*. The idea that a terrible whirlpool at the end of the earth plunges into a subterranean Otherworld inhabited by superior and not necessarily friendly beings has been the stuff of fantastic, mystical theories for two centuries: Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *The Coming Race* has these beings from below, with their ultimate weapon, a force called by the invented word *vril*, poised to emerge, invade, and subjugate the sunlit realms of this planet.⁸ Poe’s *Pym* has a precursor with a Near Eastern connection of direct interest to us: it follows closely Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a long narrative poem about a doomed Antarctic expedition, in which the surviving sailor—accursed for his horrible, unmotivated murder of an albatross—is pursued by a spirit the poet imagined after reading the medieval account of the exorcism at Constantinople of an Armenian-speaking demon.⁹

Cultural contacts are not unidirectional arrows, and sometimes indeed circle back to their remote sources rather like whirlpools: so in 1857, an abridged Western Armenian version of *Pym*, based upon the French of Baudelaire, was published by the Vienna Mekhitarists. They labored for a sophisticated and eclectic readership interested in the Romantics and in tales of adventure and of moral edification. For the same year saw a translation into Armenian of George Gordon Lord Byron’s *The Prisoner of Chillon* by Movsēs Zohrapean of Arc‘ax at Shemakhi,¹⁰ and the last Classical Armenian edition, at Tiflis (then the cultural capital of the Eastern Armenians), of the nearly millennium-old miscellany “The History of the City of Bronze”, with its legend of a metropolis of death in the distant wastes inhabited by

writer’s unpublished lecture series “The Near East in the Mind of America” (National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, Belmont, MA, 2002) also explored the interests of such American Renaissance thinkers as Emerson and Thoreau in Armenia and Iran.

⁸ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 34-36. Kripal points out that Herman Melville got from Poe’s account of a great white whale, Mocha Dick his idea for Moby Dick. That oceanic prose work, which in *Bend Sinister* Vladimir Nabokov insightfully calls a poem, is also replete with references to the ancient Near East.

⁹ See James R. Russell, “A Scholium on Coleridge and an Armenian Demon,” *JSAS* 10 (1998,1999 [2000]), pp. 63-71.

¹⁰ H. [=Fr.] Ep‘rem.V. Č‘agrčean, trans., [no author], *Nandugedc‘i Art‘ur Kordon Bimin pataharner* (The incidents of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket) (Vienna: Mxit‘areanc‘ tparan, 1857): see the descriptions in Gevorg V. Abgaryan, ed., *Hay girk‘ 1851-1900 t‘vakannerin* (The Armenian Book in the Years 1851-1900). *Hay grk‘i matenagitut‘yun* (Bibliology of the Armenian Book) (Erevan: Girk‘, 1999), pp. 44-45, nos. 555, 562.

automata—a tale with a certain kinship to Coleridge and Poe, after all.¹¹ It was a moment in Armenian history of rapid innovation and progress, in the context of an ancient and unbroken cultural heritage—a point in its literature at which a modern adventure story could rub shoulders with an ancient travel narrative without the sense of dissonance or discontinuity.

Though Poe was slow to be appreciated in his native America, not least because his life and work both offended the standards of Victorian propriety, the French poet Charles Baudelaire recognized his genius and appreciated his unusual art instantly. And it was from the latter's essay and translations into French that Western Armenian writers, many of them studying at European universities and settling in Constantinople, quickly learnt of the American visionary. English was not then the international language of culture and commerce that it has since become, and Poe's readership, by virtue of his language, would then have been limited and provincial; so Baudelaire's discovery was doubly fortunate. Pre-Revolutionary Eastern Armenians also studied in Europe and Russia, and read Poe in French or in the Russian translations of the Symbolist poet Konstantin Dmitrievich Bal'mont. The latter was born near Vladimir on 15 June 1867, fled Russia after the Revolution, and died in exile in Nazi-occupied Paris on 23 December 1942.¹² Poe's bells, now *Kolokola*, were to clang and thunder in Russian music, too, long before Phil Ochs could ring them on the poet's familiar soil. Sergei Vasilievich Rakhmaninov, who was born at Semyonovo, near Great Novgorod, on 1 April 1873, composed his choral symphony "The Bells" in 1913, using Bal'mont's translation. He emigrated from Russia a few months after the October Revolution of 1917, composing very little thereafter. The symphony was published in 1920.¹³ Rakhmaninov, like Bal'mont, died in

¹¹ The tale seems to be based on the Mahayana Buddhist *Saddharmapundarikasutra* ("Lotus Sutra of the Good Law"), which may have originated in Iranian Central Asia. The tale was transmitted to Armenia and written down *ca.* AD 1000, with many subsequent revisions and recensions. The intermediary stages would have been Manichaean and Muslim. The Lotus Sutra seems to have been receptive to Western didactic story-telling, too; for it re-interprets the parable of the Prodigal Son of Christian scripture. See James R. Russell, "The Cross and the Lotus: The Armenian Mediaeval Miscellany *The City of Bronze*," Soudavar Memorial Lecture, Univ. of London, 1 Feb. 2008, published in Vesta Curtis and Sarah Stewart, eds., *The Rise of Islam. The Idea of Iran*, vol. 4 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 71-81; and James R. Russell, "The Tale of the Bronze City in Armenian," in Thomas Samuelian and Michael Stone, eds., *Medieval Armenian Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies 6 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 250-261.

¹² See Joan Delaney Grossman, *Edgar Allan Poe in Russia: A Study in Legend and Literary Influence* (Würzburg: Jal Verlag, 1973); Russian trans. Maria A. Shereshevskaya, *Edgar Allan Po v Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 1998).

¹³ The focus on bells themselves in the choral symphony was new; but the use of bells in Russian music was not. One recalls just two famous examples: the coronation scene in Modest Musorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*, and the *1812 Overture* of Pyotr Il'ich Tchaikovsky. There is a long and rich tradition of bell ringing in Russia: fine bells are cast at Novgorod, and legend has it that the faithful can hear the bells of sunken Kitezh ringing. There is in Armenia a similar legend about sunken Arčeš (present day Erciş) on the north

exile, and only a year after the poet, on 28 March 1943 in California. Now let us look at the poem itself.

The Bells

Edgar Allan Poe

I

Hear the sledges with the bells-
Silver bells!
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
In the icy air of night!
While the stars that oversprinkle
All the heavens, seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells-
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

II

Hear the mellow wedding bells,
Golden bells!
What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!
Through the balmy air of night
How they ring out their delight!
From the molten-golden notes,
And in tune,
What a liquid ditty floats
To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats
On the moon!
Oh, from out the sounding cells,
What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!
How it swells!
How it dwells

shore of Lake Van; see James R. Russell, "The Shrine Beneath the Waves," *RES* 51 (Spring 2007), pp. 136-156; Russian trans. "Svyatilishche pod volnami," *Rossiia XXI* (2007.4), pp. 156-196.

On the Future! how it tells
Of the rapture that impels
To the swinging and the ringing
Of the bells, bells, bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells-
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

III

Hear the loud alarum bells-
Brazen bells!
What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
In the startled ear of night
How they scream out their affright!
Too much horrified to speak,
They can only shriek, shriek,
Out of tune,
In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,
In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,
Leaping higher, higher, higher,
With a desperate desire,
And a resolute endeavor,
Now- now to sit or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon.
Oh, the bells, bells, bells!
What a tale their terror tells
Of Despair!
How they clang, and clash, and roar!
What a horror they outpour
On the bosom of the palpitating air!
Yet the ear it fully knows,
By the twanging,
And the clanging,
How the danger ebbs and flows:
Yet the ear distinctly tells,
In the jangling,
And the wrangling,
How the danger sinks and swells,
By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells-
Of the bells-
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells-
In the clamor and the clangor of the bells!

IV

Hear the tolling of the bells-
Iron Bells!
What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!
In the silence of the night,
How we shiver with affright
At the melancholy menace of their tone!
For every sound that floats
From the rust within their throats
Is a groan.
And the people- ah, the people-
They that dwell up in the steeple,
All Alone
And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,
In that muffled monotone,
Feel a glory in so rolling
On the human heart a stone-
They are neither man nor woman-
They are neither brute nor human-
They are Ghouls:
And their king it is who tolls;
And he rolls, rolls, rolls,
Rolls
A paeon from the bells!
And his merry bosom swells
With the paeon of the bells!
And he dances, and he yells;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the paeon of the bells-
Of the bells:
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the throbbing of the bells-
Of the bells, bells, bells-
To the sobbing of the bells;
Keeping time, time, time,
As he knells, knells, knells,
In a happy Runic rhyme,
To the rolling of the bells-
Of the bells, bells, bells:
To the tolling of the bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells-
Bells, bells, bells-

To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.

The structure of the poem is simple. There are four parts, with four kinds of bells: silver, gold, bronze, and iron. Somewhat differently arranged, these are the epochs of the world, an old Greek idea from an older Near Eastern one, a metaphor of time decaying from its pristine golden age to the harsh iron final epoch of blood and violence. So in a way the poem traces obliquely the history of the world, from Eden to Apocalypse. One expects an occult cosmology with ancient roots from Poe. But “The Bells” does not end in a maelstrom of disaster at all—and as we have seen, Poe is only too happy to have an iron age ring down the curtain. Instead, the poem rings, rolls, clangs, tinkles, in a luxury of repetitive alliterations, the pleasure of pure sound, and concludes with a *happy* Runic rhyme. I think this coda is meant, not thematically, but *musically*, as a recapitulation of the opening theme, and what we have just read or heard are the movements of a symphony. Now, music has often been called a language, but one in which one cannot make a statement susceptible to translation. Poe seems to have forced his language into the procrustean semantic limitations, then, of music—the poem does not actually say anything, by the standards of poetic speech. The translatable aspect of the poem really doesn’t matter, and can be reduced to this: the silver bells are happy, the golden ones are passionate, the bronze ones are frightened, and the iron ones are sad. Now these feelings are not *thoughts* for which words are needed, though we can of course verbalize them as we wish—they are primary, animal *emotions* that are pre-linguistic and can be physically expressed without benefit of language at all. Bells are used in fact to chime at weddings, to sound alarms, to toll at funerals: with their metallic tongues, they are the musical instruments that come most closely to making actual linguistic statements, albeit ones that, as I have suggested, we do not require language for. That is a very enticing idea all by itself, considering its implications for the signifier-signified problem. But it was particularly attractive to the Symbolists, an artistic movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They sought in words, music, and painting to explore just such regions of the senses where the semantic and the phonetic, the human and the natural worlds, elusively and ineluctably meet, in regions of colors in between those of the spectrum, at times in between night and day, in places hinted at, at the edge of one’s field of vision. So the tower of “The Bells” properly rose over the imaginal temple of Bal’mont and the other heirs of Baudelaire.

2. THE ALARUM: SEVAG, TERYAN, AND CH‘ARENTS‘

Rupen Sevag (né Chilingirian)¹⁴ was born at Silivri near Constantinople in 1885; after graduating from the Berberian school in the capital he went to

¹⁴ A note on transliteration: I have transliterated here Modern Western and Eastern Armenian here as their respective speakers pronounce those dialects, and have done so in both cases in a

Lausanne to study medicine. Following the revolution of 1908 he and his friends founded the newspaper *Surhandak* (“The Courier”); he worked also for the newspaper *Azatamart* (“Freedom Struggle”) of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the *Dašnak’ut’iun*. This trajectory of remarkable social and geographical mobility is not unusual for talented Western Armenian artists and intellectuals in the decades before the Genocide. Sevag is a fine lyric poet, his Armenian limpid and flowing; his sentiments, gentle and noble. This poem, with an almost liturgical refrain recalling the Beatitudes, expresses a simple joy in the beauty of nature that one finds particularly in the lyrics of Sevag’s contemporary, Misak’ Medzarents’ (1886-1908). And in two verses— lines 5-6— Sevag seems to have decided to evoke the evanescence of the ship on the sea by eschewing as best he could the hard and heavy affricates in which Armenian abounds, striving for a liquid vocalism marked by two hiatuses (marked in bold type): *G’anēana navən herraga,/ Lijən yeraz m’ē, ga u ch’əga*.

NIGHTFALL

Night has fallen, cloudless, infinite.
What subtle name to its ten thousand crystals
May I give this holy space of dream?
O! the beatitude of living.

The far-off ship into nonexistence recedes.
The lake is a dream, it is and it isn’t.
And the watery whisper is its sole witness,
O! beatitude of whispering.

Above, a thousand stars, a thousand lights below:
Souls stirring half in shadow,
Rock and stream and plant converse:
O! beatitude of earthly things.

And the chapel, limpid, rings,
Here below the hoary trees
In this sweetness’ plenitude,
O! its petrified beatitude.¹⁵

simplified form to enable readers who are not specialists in the language to have a sense of its sound— a paramount consideration with the kind of poetry considered here. So, for two different poets, one from Constantinople and the other from Erevan, sharing the same *nom de plume*, one writes Sevag (Western) and Sevak (Eastern). For Classical Armenian, and in the citation of bibliographic references, I have employed the standard Hübschmann-Meillet system of transcription.

¹⁵ The Western Armenian text, from Alek’sandr T’op’č’yan, ed., Ruben Sevak, *Erker* (Works) (Erevan: Sovetakan groġ, 1985), p. 155:

Like many Armenian students abroad, he was lonely and lovelorn, and adopted a tragic, romantic persona, fancying himself in several poems a suffering knight:¹⁶

THE KNIGHT'S SONG

See! He has saddled his gray:
The golden saddle astride,
Proud and silent goes the knight.
But tell ye, Whither does he ride?

His proud mount like a young lass prances;
The dawn is a parliament of flowers.
Invisible, the choir of a thousand birds is chanting—
But say ye, Whither does the knight go?

Where are the handsome soldiers all?
Does our awesome warrior ride to war?
No. He is wounded to his very soul.
Tell ye, Whither does the knight go?

Now he has gained the rocky crest.
He shields his face with iron gauntlet:
Impassioned down his horse is plunging.
The noble knight is going to his death.

KISHERN ICHAV

*Kishern ichav anamb, anhun,
Pyr pyureghe inch 'nurp bahun,
Akh! abrelu yerchangut 'yun...*

*G'aneana navn herraga:
Lijn yeraz m'e, ga u ch'ga,
Churi shshunchn e log vega,
Shshnchelu yerchangut 'yun.*

*Vern hazar asdgh, varn hazar luys,
Gisasdverin mech hokehuyz
Ge khosagts 'in k'ar, vedag, puys:
Akh! ireru yerchangut 'yun...*

*U ge tsayne madurn hsdag:
Sa dzeruni dzarrerun dag,
Ays k'aghts 'rut 'yan mech povantag
K'aranalu yerchangut 'yun!...*

¹⁶ Arm. text in T'op'č'yan, *Erker*, p. 132.

Very moving, with shades perhaps of Poe's "Eldorado." But Sevag, a handsome and pleasant man, did not have to pine very long. He was married to a beautiful young woman and gave up his narcissistic reveries. Events in the outer world, too, swept aside the romantic pose of self-pity. The Adana massacres of 1909, coming less than a year after the Ottoman revolution, shocked Armenians who had believed, perhaps naïvely, in the reformist promise of multicultural brotherhood. The grieving, angry poems of Sevag's *Karmir girik'ə* ("The Red Book") can be compared to Siamant'o's similarly-titled cycle *Karmir lurer barekamēs* ("Red News from My Friend"),¹⁷ and his poem *Verjin hayerə* ("The Last Armenians") of that year was darkly prophetic. It would seem others felt intimations of catastrophe, for in the Summer of 1913 the Eastern Armenian Symbolist poet Vahan Teryan (1885-1920) was to write, "Could I really be the last poet,/ Last singer of my land?/ Is it death, perhaps, or sleep/ That has encompassed you, shining Nairi?" (*Mit'e verjin poetn em yes/ Verjin yergich'n im yer kri:/ Mahn e ardyok', t'e ninjə k'ez/ Patel, paytsarr Nairi?*)¹⁸

After obtaining his medical degree, Sevag returned to Constantinople in May 1914 with his young German wife Helene (née Apell) and their son Levon. When war broke out in August of that year he was conscripted as a military doctor and served in the Ottoman army at Çanakkale (i.e., Gallipoli, site of the bloodiest battle of the war). On 24 April 1915 many of his friends were among the 250-odd Armenian leaders and intellectuals arrested in the capital, as the wheels of the Genocide began to turn. Sevag expected arrest daily, but perhaps his utility in the war effort was responsible for the delay. He was detained only on 22 June of that year and was deported to Çankiri, where several of his literary colleagues arrested earlier had been concentrated. There he continued to practice medicine, while his wife sought German diplomatic intervention for his release. In his last telegram he wrote to her that he was being sent to Ayaş together with the poet Daniel Varuzhan. It would seem that even after a short sojourn in his remote place of exile his diligence and kindness as a physician had won him the devotion of his many Muslim patients, one of whom warned him that a trap had been laid and he must convert to Islam and marry the man's daughter to escape death. Sevag brushed the warning aside, and told the good-hearted Turk that he was already a family man. Perhaps he was unable to comprehend how the government could want to kill a person not only harmless, but so obviously useful.

¹⁷ Peter Balakian and Nevart Yaghlian, trs., *Bloody News from My Friend: Poems by Siamanto*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996, with a superb introduction by the poet and scholar Prof. Peter Balakian, is the only volume in English that does justice to the poetry of this period of catastrophe.

¹⁸ Vach'e Partizuni, ed., Vahan Teryan, *Erkeri žolovacu* (Collected Works) (Erevan: Haypethrat, 1960), vol. 1, p. 235. Nairi is here a poetic name for Armenia that Ch'arents' was to adopt; see below.

That same day the Armenian prisoners were taken away, and a Kurdish band led by the local operatives of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress party ambushed the deportees on the road: they tortured and mutilated them before killing them all. On 2 September the Turkish authorities, who had received official notification of Sevag's death on 30 August, requested that the Germans remove Helene to Germany. She refused to budge, but when on 11 September she learnt of his murder, she left with her family for Switzerland within hours. Turkey's wartime ally Germany rejected her further protests, abandoning the elaborate charade of treating the premeditated murder as a tragic incident of wartime chaos, and in the end she wrote this to the rulers of her native country: "If you love God, use every ounce of energy to confront the lying accusations being made [against the Armenians by the Turks]. Try to save whatever you can save by employing the most definite resolve. If you do not make use of every possibility in your power, the blood of innocent women, children, the sick and the elderly will ascend to the heavens and damn Germany." Helene then applied to the Armenian Bureau in Lausanne, requesting Armenian citizenship. She died at the end of 1967 without ever teaching her two children a single word of German. Levon passed away in 2005; Shamiram, who was born at Constantinople just before her father's arrest, was still alive in 2009 when the great scholar and historian Prof. Taner Akçam interviewed her.¹⁹

Sevag had written two poems about the massacres of Armenians in which he employed the image of bells. "Bells, bells!" (*Zankagner, zankagner!*) has been anthologized several times; but "The Alarm Bells" (*Ahazangerə*) was published posthumously in the journal *Šant'* (1918.2, p. 18), and was first anthologized only in 1985. Here are both poems.²⁰

¹⁹ See Taner Akçam, "The Chilingirian Murder: A Case Study from the 1915 Roundup of Armenian Intellectuals," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25.1 (Spring 2011), pp. 127-143. I am indebted for this reference to Marc Mamigonian, Academic Director of NAASR, Belmont, MA.

²⁰ The Western Armenian text, T'op'č'yan, *Erker*, pp. 106-108:

ZANKAGNER, ZANKAGNER!

*Zangakner, pari, pari zankagner!
Inch' pan gaset's'uts' tser kuzhgan lezun,
Khosk' yellel g'uze aryune vazun...
Ge lrrek', pari, pari zankagner?*

*Arteok' tser mist'ik' hakakn aruyre,
Ur geghev badets' aghot'k'i p'oshin,
Yev ur g'erazer khungi kolorshin,
Heghagardz ts'aven: anzor, ge lrre?*

Voch'! Tser taravor hokin bghntsi

BELLS, BELLS!

Bells, kind bells!
What thing has stopped your tolling tongues?
The blood, flowing, wants to cry out!
Why, good bells, are you still?

Could your mystic breath exhaled by bronze
Encrusted with the dust of prayer
Where the smoke of incense slept,
Struck strengthless by this sudden pain be stilled?

No! Your age-old, bronze-forged soul

*Vor shad, shad hajakh deser e Parin
Haght'evadz Ch'aren— ayzhm ir parparrin
U ir Asdudzuyn vra ge gasgadzi...*

*Art, ur ek' ch'k'nagh khosdunner khach'in,
Yeghpayrut'yan zur parparrner, ur ek'?
Gerag ge p'skhe hoghn amenurek'...
Kedern aryunov, tiagov g'urrch'in...*

*U g'iyna ayn vor ge dznge vakhov,
Zi t'urn aveli artar e Khach'en:
Zi gyank'n anonts' e miayn vor k'ach en:
Anonts' vor g'abrin urishin mahov.*

*Vorovhedev terr herru e orn ayn,
Yerp kayln u karrnug sirov aradzin...
T'e abril g'uze karre noradzin:
Bedk' e agrrav sre lrrelyayn.*

*Lurr ek', zankagner, Asdvadz'n e merrer.
Kuyzh dvek' vaghvan: ir hasge merrav.
Kuyzh dvek' Hayun: zi azke merrav.
Zankagner, dzerug, pari zankagner...*

*Inch'bes g'uzei tserin baranin
Gakhvil u ts'nts'el yergat' pazugov.
Anonk' vor ingan pyurov, k'ove k'ov,
Tser ghoghanchin hed, lalu bedk' unin...*

*Hokiis hazar, khul ghoghanchnerov
Korrats'ek', zanker, u gadaghoren
Kahavizhets'ek' tser yergat' t'arren,
Urge miayn lal kidts'ak' tarerov...*

O, ghoghanchets'ek', Asdvadz'n e merrer!..

That again and again has beheld Good
By Evil vanquished, now doubts
Its voice, and doubts its God as well.

Where are you then, sweet promises of the Cross?
Where have you gone, O vain fraternal talk?
Everywhere the earth is vomiting blood.
The rivers are swollen with corpses and gore...

And whoever bends his knee in fear, but falls:
For the drawn sword is truer than the Cross,
Since life is for the brave alone,
For those who live by another's death.

For the day is yet far off
When wolf and lamb together graze in love.
If the newborn lamb wishes to survive
He must sharpen in secret his fangs.

You are silent, O bells: God is dead.
Toll for the morrow: its harvest is dead.
Toll for the Armenian: his nation is dead.
Bells, agèd, kind bells...

How I wanted from your rope
To hang and shake you with an iron arm:
The fallen tens of thousands, row on row,
Need your tolling for their howl.

My soul's thousand hollow peals
Thunder forth, O bells, and savage
Plunge down from your nest of iron
Where for ages you know only how to sob,

And let your clangor well the death of God.

Lausanne, 2 June 1909.

THE ALARM BELLS

Night of blood, the scenes and recollections!...
Again this night, this night of torments,
Bursting from within my sick soul's walls,
Clangs the tolling bell's dark song.

They are the bells of alarm, whose wild
And awful black and brazen sobs
Of catastrophe and of death's dire tidings
Thunder anew within my fevered skull.

Ringling, lamentation, bitter cries,
Shrieks and curses, and a mad exulting,
And from the midst of the demented groaning
Sounds the depthless terror's bell.

From the reddened plains, red with corpses strewn,
Can you not tell— the deceitful
Packs of dogs all sated on our flesh, their
Horrid snarling as night falls?

Can you not see, O so very far away,
On the horizon all scarlet in the conflagration
The lordly, godly, dominating
Domes that rise, decreeing death?

My eyes again see only red:
The last deep sighs heaved from breasts,
Heaped together, the dead and the dying,
And the cawing of the teeming pitch-black crows.

They ring out the alarm: in gloom, I listen.
They ring out the alarm whose unspeakable tale is without an end.
And out of my sickened soul's walls, penned
This night, they swell and burst and ring again.²¹

²¹ Western Armenian text in T'op'č'yan 1985, pp. 169-170:

AHAZANKERE

Aryuni kidzer, badgerner, husher!...
Noren ays kisher,— danjank'i kisher—
Hivant hokiis baderun mechen
Ghoghanchi khavar yerker ge hnh' en.

Ahazankern en, ur irents' vayri
U ahegh u mut' lalyunn aruyri
Vor egherrnoren, mahakuzhoren,
Dentod kangis dag ge korran noren.

Ghoghanche... Voghpi, aghekarsh lalu,
Jich'i, anedzk'i,— vayrak alelu—
U harrach'neru mechen khelahegh

In the first poem, Sevag's bells toll for the victims of a real, not an imagined, apocalypse, and his language is starkly descriptive rather than musical. Yet his imagery and message are phantasmagoric, a blasphemous inversion of the Christian past. It is not the meek, but the violent, that are to inherit the earth. For the lion to lay down with the lamb, the latter must grow fangs. The bell's tongue is like a gallows where the poet wants to hang and swing, and the last peal will be the sound of the bell falling from its collapsing tower. In the second poem, the bells toll maddeningly within the poet's fevered brain, the sound itself summoning a strongly chromatic landscape of nightmare: the bells drive the poet insane. The use of tolling bells to symbolize historical disaster was not unique to Armenian poetry in the period. The modern Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875-1943), a contemporary of Sevag and native of the Russian Empire, wrote a similar poem, though from a different point of view. In Tsarist Russia, church bells summoned mobs to pogroms against the Jewish communities at Easter time, so in his *Hapa'amonim (balada)* ("The Bells (a ballad)"),²² *El ra'am pa'amonim—qol qore le-dam*, "To the thunder of bells a voice calls out for blood," *Bom-bom! Bom-bom! Bom-bom!* Ukrainian *haidamaks*—willing brigands enlisted by the authorities like the marauding Kurds who terrorized Armenians—storm the town, rape, plunder, defile the synagogue, and then "over it they built a tower white and tall" (*u-migdal lo banu lavan va-ram*) with a cluster of bells. But one of the *Lamed-vavnikim*, the Thirty-six just men for whose sake God allows the wicked world to go on, chants *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead, for the victims of the pogrom. And Amen, the bells ring in response. The priest

Sarsap'i anhun ghighanchn e ahegh.

*Tiadzadzg garmir, garmir tashderen,
Tuk' ch'ek' imanar davajanoren
Mezmov hap'rats'adz shan vohmagneru
Verchaluysin tem vorrnume ahargu...*

*U ch'ek' denser, akh! herrve herru
Hrtehov garmir horizonneru
Vera dirapar, u asdvadzapar
Ishkhogh kmpet'nere mahaparparr?*

*Garmir ge desnen ach'k'ers noren...
Verchin harrach'ner gurdzk'eru khoren,
Merrel, hokevark', guyd guyd, k'ov k'ovi
Grrgrrats'ogh sev khumper akrravi...*

*Ahazankern en, g'ungntrem drdum,
Ahazankere, anpav, anbadum,
Vor hivant hokvuys baderun mechen
Noren ays kisher g'urrin, ge hnch'en...*

²² Text and translation in Ruth Finer Mintz, ed. and tr., *Modern Hebrew Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 66-71.

sprinkles holy water to set the enchanted bells aright and stop their anomalous, autonomous ringing, but to no avail. For at the vigil for the Temple in the middle of every night, *Shuv ne'enakh ha-pa'amon ba-migdal ha-ram/ Ha-metsilot ne'enakhot gam hen/ Be-tsiltsul-yegonim, be-tsiltsul shel khi, / Amen, amen, ve-amen!* “Again in the tall tower sighs the bell/ And with him the chimes sigh as well,/ And tolling sorrows, ringing grace again:/Amen, Amen, Amen!” Like the Armenian writing in the wake of the Adana massacre, the Hebrew poet reacting to the pogroms in Kishinev, Kiev, and elsewhere in 1903-1905 turns Poe’s almost abstract creation into a lament for a real and immediate disaster. Sevag inverts the symbolism of the church bell in protest against the silence of God; through his invention of a mystical tale in balladic form, Tchernichovsky inverts the anti-Semitic overtones of Russian church bells, redeeming and appropriating them to the *Tiqqun khatsot*, the midnight vigil. It is an unwished-for irony that for both peoples these horrors, experienced only on the eve of World War I, were but the prelude to the greater catastrophes of a dark century.

In the wake of the Armenian Genocide a republic was forged in the sliver of the country Russian rule had protected from the slaughter. In 1921, after a civil war, Armenia became a Communist republic that was to share all the triumphs and disasters of the newly born Soviet Union. The bard of this new era was Yeghishe Ch’arents’, born Soghomonian at Kars, Western Armenia, in 1897. Ch’arents’ was fascinated by Poe and by the irrational, the power of Eros: he read Freud, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud. He entitled a late poem *Ulyalum*, the Russian form of the name of Poe’s poem “Ulalume”—he did not know English, so we may be certain he read Poe’s poems, including “The Bells”, in Bal’mont’s Russian translation. (See Appendix) In recent years, as the poet’s hidden private papers have been discovered, deciphered, and published, we have learnt more and more of the creative inner life of a man who had outwardly come to personify the new Communist culture of Armenia but who simultaneously lived within the spiritual heritage of St. Gregory of Narek and the artistic world of the Eastern and Western Armenian Symbolists Vahan Teryan and Misak’ Medzarents’. Though as a spokesman for the new, proletarian Armenia he derided the bourgeois ARF and its nationalism,²³ he

²³ In the early period of Soviet history, before Stalin imposed a cultural and sexual Puritanism to buttress his dictatorial rule, free love and sexual promiscuity were part of the revolutionary ethos. The Tiflis intellectual Nikol Aghbalean, minister of culture of the first Armenian republic, recognized and proclaimed the talent of the young Ch’arents’ and arranged housing and a sinecure for the poet in those very lean times. After the Communist takeover Aghbalean fled to exile in Iran, and Ch’arents’ sent him in 1923 several booklets of his latest verses, writing several lines of affection and gratitude in dedication. Aghbalean was outraged by what he considered Ch’arents’ sexual immodesty and vulgarity, and sent back a crudely parodic poem: see his embittered memoir “*Elišē Ć’arenc’ n u es*” (Yeghishe Ch’arents’ and I), in Nikol Aghbalean, *Grakan-k’nnadatakan erker* (Literary and Critical Works) (Beirut: Hamazgayin, 1959), pp. 329-343.

also loved Varuzhan, Siamant'ō, and Sevag. Through the 1930s the Stalinist dictatorship tightened its hold on the country, and Ch'arents', who had been director of the Transcaucasian Publishing House, a leading light of the new Union of Soviet Writers, chair of various Armenian and All-Union publication committees, a man whose portrait followed directly those of Lenin, Stalin, and Khanjyan (the Armenian Party Secretary) in Soviet Armenia's 1932 Yearbook, was gradually ostracized from the literary and cultural life of the nation. He wrote many of his last works alone, in a kind of delirium or trance-like state induced partly by morphine, partly by loneliness and terror. He was arrested in the great purge and murdered in Erevan in November 1937.

Ch'arents'' immediate literary precursor was Vahan Teryan; and from the latter's poetic cycle *Erkir Nairi* (The Land of Nairi), begun in 1913 and continued over ten years, he inherited the idea of calling his country by its ancient Urartean name to evoke a kind of magical-realist or archetypal, Platonic Armenia that exists through the imagination of the poet, truer than visible fact, and manifesting itself in the sublunar world through the medium of creative, literary art. By the 30s the sense of a divergence between the actuality of the country and Ch'arents'' ideal was intensified: there was the everyday Armenia of crude and petty cruelty and privation, of Stalinist cultural bloodhounds; yet hovering above it is another country, the ideal of which the manifestation of the late 1930s is but one fleeting and flawed, wounded expression. Bells ring through Teryan's cycle, several of his poems can be considered here, for their own kinship with Sevag and with ancient streams of Armenian poetry and for their crucial influence of Ch'arents'' development.

You are not proud, my fatherland:
 You are sad, and wise.
 A brand of fire consumes you,
 A promise ancient and entrancing.
 Could it be that for that very sorrow
 I do not love you thus tenderly,
 And submit, stubborn like you,
 My fatherland, bitter and sweet.
 I was never dazzled by your laughing glory
 With its ancient, bygone shine.
 I loved you, your soul free of vengeance,
 Your soft and breaking songs,
 Your poverty so dark and still,
 Your prayers bitter and full of pain,
 The sad striking of your bells,
 And the faint lights of your monastic cells.

(1915)²⁴

In poem three of Teryan's Nairi cycle, *Ijnum e gishern angut' u mt'in* (Relentless and dark descends the night), 1917, the poet echoes Sevag's alarms, but in his confidence also echoes the first verse, *Erknēr erkin, erknēr erkir*, "Labored heaven, labored earth", of the ancient hymn of the birth of Vahagn, the dragon-slaying storm god (about whom Ch'arents' wrote a long *poema*; and whom Narekats'i echoes in his meditation on the semandron, as we shall see presently): "Tireless pilgrim, heir to the ages,/ A Nairian sad, I march on without haste./ Let the ill-omened night cheat with threats of alarm:/ The darker the gloom, the firmer is my tread./ With faith undimmed, labor, O my land! (*yerknir im erkir*) / Sacred is your way; and lofty, your crown..."²⁵

In the last year of his life, 1923, in the later poems of the cycle, Teryan writes, "The thin tolling of the bell/ Bewails the pains of my land" (*Barak zangaki zarke/ Lalis e yerkris ts'avere*) and "And those bells sobbing/ In my dying land—/ Do they not excite your soul/ In infinite sorrow?" (*U zangern ayn lalagin/ Merrnogh im yerkrum/ Ch'en huzelu k'o hogin/ Tkhrut'yamb anhun*). The echoes of Teryan carry far. As we shall see presently, Paruyr Sevak was

²⁴ The Eastern Armenian text, from Partizuni, *Erkeri žolovacu*, vol. 1, p. 229:

*Du hpart ch'es, im hayrenik',
Trtum es du u imastun:
Kizum e k'ez mi hur knik',
Mi hemayogh u hin khostum.
Yev mit'e ayd vshtid hamar
Ch'em sirum k'ez ayspes k'nk'ush
Yev khonarhvum k'ez pes hamarr,
O, hayrenik' darn u anush...
Ch'eshlats'a khndun p'arrk'id
Ants'yal u hin p'aylov yerbek':
Sirets'i k'ez, ank'en hogid,
Yev yergered meghm u bekbek,
Kheghchut'yuned khavar u lurr,
Aghot'k'nered darn u ts'avot,
Zangaknerid zarke tekhur,
Yev khugherid luysern aghot...*

The *hin khostum*, "ancient promise" echoes in Ch'arents'" poem *Mahvan tesil* ("Vision of death") of 1920, line 6 where the scaffold erected for a public execution is *mi hin khostum, vor ankatar, drzhats t'oghi* "an ancient promise abandoned unfulfilled and betrayed," Yeghishe Ch'arents', *Erkeri žolovacu* (Collected Works) (Erevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1962), vol. 1, p. 321. The famous twentieth and concluding poem, *Yes im anush Hayastani...* ("I love my sweet Armenia's...") of Ch'arents'" *Talaran* ("Canticle") of 1920-1921 (Ch'arents', *Erkeri žolovacu*, vol. 1, pp. 246-247), is the true heir of this poem, though, with its evocations of Nairian girls, huts lost in darkness, and the nation's millennial wounds.

²⁵ Partizuni, *Erkeri žolovacu*, vol. 1, p. 227: *Ukhtavor andul, dareri zharrang./ Mi hek' nairts'i gnum em ankang:/ T'ogh guzhkan gishern ahasast dave—/ Vork'an mut'e sev, aynk'an yes hamarr./ Yerknir im erkir havatov anmar,/ Surb e k'o ughin yev psaked veh...*

to write of the Genocide, “However many words, every one a groan,/ No matter what the song it’s only crying;” and it would seem he echoes here Teryan’s lines in the Nairi cycle, “Every thought now is but a wound;/ Every look, a sharpened sword./ The bloodied corpses are mute and bare,/ Staring strengthless at heaven in vain”.²⁶

Ch‘arents‘, steeped in Teryan, had read Sevag as well, and it would seem he turns to Sevag’s iteration of “The Bells”, in his *Fatherland Requiem* of 1936, a work written, as Russians said in the Soviet era, “for the desk drawer”:²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., p. 228: *Amen mi mitk‘ hima mi verk‘, / Amen hayats‘k‘ hatu mi sur, / Arnot diern en hamr u merk/ Nayum erkink‘ anzor u zur.*

²⁷ Yeghishe Ch‘arents‘, *Rek‘viem hayrenakan* (Fatherland Requiem), 1936, in Anahit Ch‘arents‘, ed., *Antip ev č‘havak‘vac erker* (Unpublished and uncollected works) (Erevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1983), pp. 116-122. Here is the transliterated text, p. 119, line 101f.:

*Zhangotvats mi zangi
Vor ch‘uni huys andam, derr
Nor arevi yev kyank‘i
Yev ghoghanji kensaber.*

*Akh, es gitem, vor mi mets
Zang e vogin nayiryan
Isk menk‘ – miayn lezuner,
Menk‘ nra dzaynn enk‘ miayn—
Yev mezanits‘ depi mer
Zhoghovrdi sirte kheghch
Dzgvats en bark paranner...*

*O! kheghch mardik, ayd duk‘,
Ayd duk‘ ek‘, vor, o, ard
Lok ach‘k‘erd ek‘ t‘art‘um
Kangnats zangi tak ayd,—*

*Zangakatan takin
Hazaramya vank‘i—
Kangnel ek‘ duk‘ voghbagin,
Vorpes shner ankirk‘,—*

*Zangakatan nerk‘o
T‘ok ek‘ p‘ntrum t‘ak‘un,
Vor vochragorts dzerrk‘ov,—
K‘ashkek‘ zangern hognats
Hazaramya zangi
Yev vayr t‘ap‘ek‘...
[...] angin.*

*Vor mi himar hnhch‘yun
Zrahat‘ap‘ arats,—
Voghj ashkharhi ayd ch‘un*

... Of a rusted bell
That has not even the hope anymore
Of new sun and of life,
Of a pealing, bringing life.

Ah, I know a great
Bell is the soul of Nairi
And we are but tongues,
We are but its voice—
And from us towards our
People's poor heart
Strain burning ropes
[...]

O, poor men! It is you,
It is you, who, Oh! now
But blink your eyes
Standing below that bell,
Beneath the bell tower
Of a monastery a thousand years old.
You stand full of lamentation,
Like passionless dogs,

Below the bell tower;
You seek the hidden cord,
So that with criminal hands
You may drag the tired bell
A thousand years old
And pull it down...
[...] priceless.

So that a stupid sound,
Shorn of its armor,
The whole world's road
You make a plain plowed

Dardznek' dasht varats,

Vor ch'mna el veh

Voch' mi zangakatun

[...]

[...]

Bayts' duk', bayts' duk', vor derr

Voch' mi ban chek' shinel—

Inch' ek' uzum mer veh

Tarrapank'its', shner?..

That there no longer remain
 Not one bell tower proud,
 [...]
 [...]
 But you, but you who still
 Have never built any thing,
 What do you want of our
 High sufferings, you dogs?...

Note in the poem the connecting epithet *hazaramya* “millennial” used of both *vank* “monastery” and *zang* “bell”, themselves a rhyming pair, as well as the play on *zhang* “rust” and *zang* “bell.” We have the text of this complex poem only in fragments owing to the deterioration of the manuscript in its place of hiding, and certainly not in its complete form, since the manuscripts are drafts. Ch‘arents‘ has taken, I think, Sevag’s image of a man grabbing at the tongue of a bell and hanging from it. But here the bell is not the voice of the mute corpses of the victims of massacre alone. In its monastery tower it has grown to cosmic dimensions, becoming the voice of the people of Nairi. The draft is fevered, violent— let us recall that as his life was disintegrating Ch‘arents‘ was drinking heavily, was addicted to morphine, and had already before turning forty witnessed more of the dark side of history than we might bear in a full lifetime. And he read Poe and died at the same age as the American poet. The destroyers of Armenian culture, soulless levelers, in the poem are trying to pull down the bell, the bell to whose invisible ropes all Nairians are tied. We have observed that bells can sing out emotion in a way that nearly breaks down the barriers between music and semantics; and the poet in turn would like to be able to sing nature, to sing beauty, to sing truth in a perfect and unmediated way. Hence Pushkin’s poem, “Echo”, in which the poet alone is the equal of pure, reverberated sound. Hence “The Bells,” hence too Ch‘arents‘’ great despairing lyric of 18 May 1934.²⁸

²⁸ The Eastern Armenian text from Ch‘arents‘, *Antip ev č‘havak‘vac erker*, p. 81:

HUZUMNERI LEZUN

*Hovn— horovel e asum,
 Andzreve— ts‘urt barrer:—
 Huzumnavor im lezu
 Inch‘u es lrrel?*

*Ayn, vor asel es uzum—
 Tes! k‘ezanits‘ zoregh—
 Drsum tsaghikn e asum,
 Yev jure byuregh.*

*Yev aghjeka ach‘k‘erits‘
 Yerb manishkn e nayum,—
 El Teryani ergeri*

THE LANGUAGE OF EMOTION

The wind is chanting its plowman's song, *Horovel, horovel, ho!*
The rain enunciates the words of cold.
My emotion-laden tongue,
Why are you so silent now?

Whatever it is you wish to say,
See! With greater power than you can command,
Outdoors by the blossoming flower is said,
And by the crystal of the water.

And in a young girl's eyes
When at a violet raptly she gazes,
What is there left at all
In a poem by Teryan that amazes?

The water runs over the brim in its passion;
The fire is a grief stained madder.
Poet, to you will be given never
This language of emotion.

3. THE BELLS OF REBIRTH: PARUYR SEVAK.

When Ch'arents' was still a young man, a boy named Paruyr Ghazaryan was born 26 January 1924, in the obscure village of Chanakhchi, Soviet Armenia—the village now bears the name Zangakatun, “Bell Tower,” after his most famous work. The young Paruyr studied at Erevan and Moscow and wrote a dissertation that was published as a monograph on the work of the 18th-century bard Sayat'-Nova. He was co-editor of the two-volume critical edition of the complete works of the first modern Western Armenian poet, Bedros Tourian. Ch'arents' had envisioned great editions of the Western Armenian poets, and had edited a few collections; this poet continued that great work. Paruyr wrote numerous lyrics and such Biblically-inspired long cycles as “Let there be light” and “Song of Songs”—and, when it was suggested by an elder writer that he adopt a *nom de plume*, chose the pen name Sevak in memory of Rupen Sevag.

Inch 'n e hmayum?...

*Jure— hordor e huzum,
Hure— mormok' karmir.
Huzumnavor ays lezun
Poet, k'ez ch'i trvi.*

In 1959, Paruyr Sevak published a poetic epic on the life of the composer Komitas *vardapet*. Komitas was a village child, educated as a priest, who became an ethnographer and ethnomusicologist, undoubtedly the most important in Armenian history. He witnessed the Genocide, went raving mad and ceased to work, died years later in exile, and was re-interred in Armenia. Sevak called his epic *Anġreli zangakatun* (The unsilenceable bell tower), an obvious reference and response to Rupen Sevag's poem discussed above. Not only is the bell not silenced, it rings unceasingly from a tower that shall stand forever; and each section is called, not a chapter, but a *lōlanġ*, a peal of bells. The book was printed in a fine edition illustrated by the graphic artist Grigor Khanjyan (1926-2000), at a critical moment, the year 1966—that is, right after the popular demonstrations in Erevan marking the 50th anniversary of the Genocide in 1965, and just before the Soviet authorities opened in 1967 the Genocide memorial that stands at Tsitsernakaberd in Erevan. The book is a *tour de force* of eloquent, alliterative style, strongly declamatory in tone, carrying the reader in its verbal flood tide through the entire history of Armenian letters and music and historical catastrophe and rebirth. The lexicon of the poet is daunting and polyphonic, utilizing every register of Armenian speech, from phrases in fifth-century Classical *grabar* culled from the works of the Golden Age to the modern dialect of the folk songs Komitas had transcribed. In this way Sevak endows the poem with the oceanic quality of Whitman and Melville: the many voices of his sea clash, and encounter each other, in symphony and in dissonance, within the single flood of historical time. It is as though a collective, millennial bell were ringing, each peal rung by a witness of a different age, sounding all the music of Armenia's history.

THE PEAL OF HOLOCAUST

To stop? Why?
 It was spring. Summer was almost come
 And heaven's firmament collapsed.
 Snow drifted over our bare heads,
 Snow like burning fire fell.
 "It is spring, down comes the snow"
 Our rivers shuddered,
 Like an opened vein were flowing:
 "Blood has turned to water"
 The valleys became graves;
 Tombs, the abysses
 "The water has swept our home away"
 Every rock became a silent monument;
 Every house, a furnace burning.
 "We have become birds without a nest"
 However many words, every one a groan,

No matter what the song it's only crying,
"Alas, alas, and woe!"
Against the fire, saber, sword,
Only the plow, the spade, the hoe,
"O child without a home"
Our land, our native soil,
Our country is desolation
"Put on black, black over my blackened heart"
A noble race of antique times
Was done to death, did not merely die,
"It is spring, down comes the snow..."²⁹

There is only one other book-length poem in modern Armenian literature comparable in both scope and artistic design to Sevak's: Ch'arents' *Girk' čanaparhi* ("The Book of the Way"), published in 1933 and designed and illustrated by Hakob Kojoyan. Ch'arents' volume shapes a new proletarian and revolutionary narrative that transforms the entire sweep of Armenian

²⁹ Paruyr Sevak, *Anġreli zangakatun* (The unsilenceable bell tower) (Erevan: Hayastan, 1966), pp. 206-207. The text in transliterated Eastern Armenian:

GHOGHANJ YEGHERRNAKAN

*Khangarel? Inch 'i hamar?
Garun er. Ch 'ekats amarr
P 'ul yekav yerknakamar,
Dzyun maghets ' mer bats ' glkhin,
Dzyun maghets ' kraki pes ...
Garun a, dzun a arel ...
Gerere mer yererman
Hosets 'in yeraki bes
Arune jur a darrel ...
Dzorere shirim dardzan,
Vihere, gerezmanots ' :
Jure mer tunn a tarel ...
Amen k 'ar lurr mahardzan,
Amen tun varrman hnots ' ,
Bnaver havk ' enk ' darrel ...
Inch 'k 'an barr voghje mrmunj.
Inch 'k 'an yerg voghje lalov:
Zulum er, zulum, lao!
T 'ri dem, sri, hri
Lok mangagh, lok bah u mach:
Tnaver-bnaver lach! ...
Mer hoghe, mer hayrenin,
Mer yerkirn amayets 'av:
Sev hagir, sevsirt mare ...
Hinavurts ' tohmik mi azg
Ch 'merrav, ayl ... mahats 'av:
Garun a, dzun a arel ...*

history, the titanic and sovereign voice of the transcendent narrator co-opting to the purpose the native Epic of Sasun, the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, the life of the first Armenian novelist Khachatur Abovyan, and the episodes of the civil wars that followed the 1917 Revolution. It spans East and West, and includes responses to Goethe and Heine, encounters with Khayyam, Ferdosi, and Pushkin, short lyrics modeled on medieval wisdom poetry, and paeans to wine, women, and song. The poem *Patgam* (“Message”, in the sense of a prophetic pronouncement) in the *Book of the Way* contains a subversive, patriotic acrostic: “O Armenian nation, your sole salvation is in your united strength!” The book was consigned to the flames soon after publication.

Kojoyan’s intricate woodcuts, executed with the perfection of style of such great Russian contemporaries and associates as Favorsky—the graphic designer whose artistry Mandelstam praises in his verses—include full-page compositions and rubrics at the incipit of each section, like Gospel manuscripts, and the larger illustrations are organized in registers like the narrative bas-reliefs of the Ancient Near East. But again, these record the millennial struggles of the workers and peasants, not the sanguinary triumphs of absolute monarchs. Communism was to be the end of history; so Charents’ reclaims both the genres of literature and of scriptural illumination for his retrospective and apocalypse. The work of the poet Sevak and the artist Khanjyan redeems the aspects of tradition that Socialism in the impetuous pride of its youth had derided. It begins to span the rift between the reborn Soviet Armenia and the vast devastation of Western Armenia, and addresses the tasks of mourning and of anger. Soviet Armenian historiography had shied away hitherto from facing the full enormity of the Genocide, partly in order not to inflame anti-Turkish feeling (though even the most ardent Communists must have regarded this consideration as a formality or fantasy), and partly in order not to cast the shadow of powerlessness and victimhood over the sunlit image of the confident, muscular new Armenian—the industrial worker and collective farmer and soldier. We can observe a similar process in Israel, where the *chalutz*, or pioneer generation sometimes caricatured the powerless Holocaust victim as *sabon*, “soap”. (The Nazis used the fat of dead Jews to make soap.) Only after the survivor states Armenia and Israel were both secure and mature were they able to integrate the past and present, in historical narrative and in art.

One way Soviet Armenia accomplished this integration, recognizing the trauma and loss of the past while celebrating the strength and vitality of the present, was the erection in 1968 of a monument on the 50th anniversary of the battle of Sardarapat, where the army of the Republic of Armenia had repulsed a Turkish invasion whose purpose was to complete the genocide begun in the west by exterminating the Armenians of the Transcaucasus as well. Since the Catholicos had ordered that every church bells ring its bells to summon General Andranik’s citizen-army to the front, the monumental

complex features a giant bell tower at the end of a long avenue lined with statues of standing eagles. The tower is flanked by recumbent winged bulls, with walls of narrative bas-reliefs to the side telling the story of the people's war.³⁰ They embody much the same iconographic plan, indeed, as the horizontal narrative panels of Kojoyan's designs for the *Book of the Way of Ch'arents'*. Paruyr Sevak wrote, turning the bells of Sardarapat into words even as Poe had done, but at the end of a very different historical journey:

SARDARAPAT

When no escape or remedy remains,
Madmen then will find a way.
Thus rose and dawned and blazed the sun
Of the great fight at Sardarapat we won:

Bells, ring out!
Summon the sacred heroes with your shout!
From Sardarapat, from this hallowed wall,
O ye generations yet to come—
Know yourselves all.

On the plain of Avarayr we strove,³¹
And here a moment of repose
We took, to render up our souls
At the battlements of Sardarapat below.

But we have not fallen. Here we stand,
We will return and have not lain to rest.
When the bells ring out to sound the alarm,
That we requite our soul's debt yet again.³²

³⁰ Both the Genocide and Sardarapat memorial complexes, including the wall of bas reliefs, are illustrated in the trilingual album *K'ari simfonia* (A Symphony in Stone) (Moscow: Progress, 1974), pp. 142-149.

³¹ The Armenian Christian armies under the command of St. Vardan Mamikonean faced the forces of the Sasanian king Yazdagird II in 451, resisting Iran's demand that the nation forsake its faith and return to Zoroastrianism. Among the major works of the artist Grigor Khanjyan is a vast tapestry, *Vardananc'*, 1985, which hangs now in the Veharan, the residence at Echmiadzin of the Catholicos. It portrays the battle, with various great men of Armenian history among the luminous warriors pressed from every side by the dark hordes. Among the heroes, destined for martyrdom, are Komitas, Ch'arents', and Sevak. See Nona Step'anyan, ed., *Grigor Xancyan* (Erevan: Graber, 2007).

³² The Armenian text:

Sardarapat

*Yerb ch'i mnum yelk' u char
Khent'er en gtnum hnar.*

Paruyr Sevak outlived his namesake by a little over a decade; his great precursor Ch‘arents‘, by a few years: Sevak and his wife were killed in a car crash in Armenia on 18 June 1971. Their children survived. The accident is generally believed to have been planned by the Soviet secret police, the KGB. The song composed almost instantly to the words of “Sardarapat” had become, like Sevak’s poem “Erevan-Erebuni,” which commemorates the 2750th anniversary of the founding of the city, an unofficial anthem. The bells of Sardarapat have become Armenia’s Liberty Bell, their message a very contemporary one, of freedom and defiance.

On the other side of the Atlantic, in Poe’s homeland, other battles for freedom—for Blacks, for women, for gays—were also being fought. A bard in the line of Poe and Whitman and Woody Guthrie, a Jewish poet and songwriter from Minnesota named Bob Zimmerman had taken the pen name Dylan after the Welsh poet, and written this ballad:

THE CHIMES OF FREEDOM

Far between sundown’s finish an’ midnight’s broken toll / We ducked inside the doorway, thunder crashing. / As majestic bells of bolts struck shadows in the sounds, / Seeming to be the chimes of freedom flashing. / Flashing for the warriors whose strength is not to fight, / Flashing for the refugees on the unarmed road of flight / An’ for each an’ ev’ry underdog soldier in the night / An’ we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing. / In the city’s melted furnace, unexpectedly we watched / With faces hidden as the walls were tightening / As the echo of the wedding bells before the blowin’ rain / Dissolved into the bells of the lightning / Tolling for the rebel, tolling for the rake / Tolling for the luckless, the abandoned an’ forsaked / Tolling for

*Ayspes tsagets‘, aregakets‘
Saradarapati marte mets.*

*Zanger, ghoghanjek ‘!
Srbazan k‘ajerin kanch‘ek‘
Ays ardar patits‘.
Serundner duk‘ dzez chanach‘ek‘
Saradarapatits‘.*

*Avarayrits‘ jank‘ arrank‘
Aystegh mi pah kang arrank‘,
Vor shunch‘ arrats shunch‘ernis tank‘
Saradarapati patin tak.*

*Bayts‘ menk‘ ch‘enkank‘, menk‘ misht kank‘,
Menk‘ ch‘hangank‘, derr ke gank‘:
Yerb tan zange, ahazange,
Vor mer hogu partk‘e tank‘.*

the outcast, burnin' constantly at stake / An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing. / Through the mad mystic hammering of the wild ripping hail / The sky cracked its poems in naked wonder / That the clinging of the church bells blew far into the breeze/ Leaving only bells of lightning and its thunder./ Striking for the gentle, striking for the kind / Striking for the guardians and protectors of the mind/ An' the poet an the painter far behind his rightful time / An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing. / In the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales/ For the disrobed faceless forms of no position/ Tolling for the tongues with no place to bring their thoughts/ All down in taken-for granted situations/ Tolling for the deaf an' blind, tolling for the mute / For the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute/ For the misdemeanor outlaw, chased an' cheated by pursuit / An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing. / Even though a clouds's white curtain in a far-off corner flashed / An' the hypnotic splattered mist was slowly lifting/ Electric light still struck like arrows, fired but for the ones / Condemned to drift or else be kept from drifting/ Tolling for the searching ones, on their speechless, seeking trail / For the lonesome-hearted lovers with too personal a tale / An' for each unharmed, gentle soul misplaced inside a jail / An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing. / Starry-eyed an' laughing as I recall when we were caught/ Trapped by no track of hours for they hanged suspended/ As we listened one last time an' we watched with one last look / Spellbound an' swallowed 'til the tolling ended/ Tolling for the aching whose wounds cannot be nursed/ For the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an' worse/ An' for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe / An' we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing.³³

4. THE MYSTICAL AND EXEGETICAL BELL THAT IS NOT A BELL.

And with Bob Dylan's song it would seem our road had ended. But nearly every subject an Armenologist studies enforces a consideration of the *longue durée*, and with Armenia the duration is nearly always very long. For all they imbibed of Poe, of Symbolism, of Communism, the Armenian poets drank of older, deeper springs as well, even when they wrote of bells. The Armenian highland was a cradle of metallurgy, so bells big and small have rung in Armenia since time immemorial.³⁴ The sound of the *k'shots*' (in English

³³ See Bob Dylan, *Lyrics: 1962-1985* (New York: Knopf, 2000), pp. 132-133. My friend the Dylanologist, Arménisant, and Joyce scholar Marc Mamigonian, to whom I owe innumerable insights and priceless bibliographical help over the years, reminded me of Dylan's song when we were discussing bells, Poe, Armenia, and America.

³⁴ Nathaniel Spear, Jr., *A Treasury of Archaeological Bells* (New York: Hastings House, 1978), pp. 110-113 (figs. 118-122), discusses a number of bronze horse bells from Urartu (Hebrew Ararat, Ch'arents' Nairi), the kingdom whose language preceded Armenian on the Plateau. One is modeled after a two-story, domed, windowed tower. These are from Alishar and Karmir Blur; and two have the inscription *Argišti úriš□i*, i.e., from the armory or treasury of king Argishti. Similar bells are known from— and illustrated in bas-relief on the necks of

liturgical terminology, the fan or flabellum) accompanies the Divine Liturgy. This is a descendant of the ancient sistrum: a silver disk under a foot wide, engraved with cherubs; little round bells, often twelve in number, are attached to its rim.³⁵ Little bells, *božož-ner*, were attached to the necks of pack animals in caravans from time immemorial, and the poet Misak‘ Medzarents‘ wrote of their sound along the paths leading down into his native village. Tambourines and cymbals were common in ancient music making— as we shall see presently, a mystical poet noted this approvingly. Armenian *zangak*, “bell”, is a loan-word from Middle Iranian; while *cnclay*, “cymbal,” is Aramaic.³⁶ The latter has great alliterative possibilities—one observes that it is a fair partner to Poe’s “tintinnabulation”—and it produces such rich compounds as *cnclajayn*, */tsntsghadzayn/*, “cymbal-voiced”. Another Armenian word for bell, *hnč‘ak* (“sunder”), is native: the political party of that name fashioned itself after the Russian reformer Alexander Herzen’s journal, *Kolokol*, “The Bell”. In Muslim-occupied Armenian lands the ringing of church bells was often forbidden, and those who were allowed to construct bell towers dared not raise them higher than a minaret. But the sound of the bells of St. Karapet of Mush carried so far that the village where the ancient monastery once stood still bears the name of Çengili—the place of bells. Within monasteries, and in other churches especially when alien rulers forbade bells, the faithful were summoned to prayer by the striking of a wooden board called in Greek a *semandron*; in Armenian, *koč‘nak* (“summoner”), *žamkoč‘* (“summoner to the Hours”), or *žamahar* (“striker of the Hours”). There is a great old bell cast with an Armenian inscription at Tat‘ew; but ecclesiastical literature, in contrast to the secular poetry we have been considering, seems to prefer the wooden *koč‘nak*. The final chapters of the *Book of Lamentation* of St. Gregory of Narek explore the meaning and power of some of the physical manifestations of Christian worship, such as the chrim, or myron, and the *semandron*. Of the latter, the Saint writes in Ch. 92.3, “By it, the sons of Zion assemble to battle against the world-conqueror, darkness” (*sovaw gumarin i paterazmi ordik‘ Siovni ənddēm ašxarhakalin xawari*). It is the “kin, very much the same in kind, to the tree of life that is in Your paradise, O God, the place of the happy summoning to come together in coursing haste to the state of beatitude, the image of the type of that tree of knowledge planted to ordain the act of choice between good and evil” (*azgakic‘ hangunanman kenac‘n*

horses at—Persepolis, several centuries later. Urartean architects seem to have worked in Iran; and Armenia became a satrapy of the Achemenids. Numerous other horse bells of the early first millennium BC have been found on the territory of Georgia and Ossetia, just north of Armenia in the Caucasus. The only time the Hebrew word for bell, *pa‘amon*, as in the poem cited above, is found in the Bible, in the book of Exodus, it is part of a list of items to be worn by the High Priest, thus the size of a horse bell again.

³⁵ Bp. Tiran Nersoyan, *Pataragamatoyc‘* (Divine Liturgy) (New York, Delphic Press, 1950), p. 248.

³⁶ This goes into Arabic, in turn, as *zill*, hence Turkish *zilei*, “cymbal-maker,” hence Avedis Zildjian, the Armenian name known and revered by every rock drummer on Earth.

p'ayti, or i draxtid Astucoy, koč'aran barwawk' hawak'man p'oyt' ant'ac'iwk' i yarkn awrhnut'ean, patker tesaki tnkoyn gitut'ean i karg antrut'ean barwoyn ew č'ari). Greater than the trumpet that sounded below the walls of Jericho (that Joshua fit the battle of), it is also superior to physically stronger materials, so before it “iron employed for the needs of war was rendered base” (*anargec'aw erkat' ar i pēts paterazmi*). He insists that he is not praising the “vibrating bell of bronze” (*zangak niwt'oy plnjoy*), though “the good instructive allegories of the tambourines of renown” (*barec'uc'akan bambrian barac'i bararnut'eanc'*) in Scripture are relevant to it in typology.

The sound of the semandron is likened to that of a whistling arrow traveling far, released in battle against Satan’s archers (*nets arjakec'er herajigs, jaynatrakans*—a phrase that encodes with repeated variations the base (*h*)*a-r-j*, “throw,” a loan from Mir. *harz-* (>MPers. *hil-*, inf. *hištan*). It resounds indeed, declares Narekats'i,

*and cags tiezerac'
ew and cirs ezerac'
i coc's jurc'
bazmut'ean covuc'
ew klzeac' noc'a*

“to the dawning-horizons of the divine realms
and to the boundary-lines of the shores
in the bosom of the waters
of the multitude of seas
and of their islands”

This pericope is phonetically and semantically complex. Its phonetic pattern is foregrounded by the two verbs *arjak-*“release” and *jig-*“pull” connected to the simile of the sound of the wooden semandron— a wooden arrow, in flight, attacking evil. The two verbal sound patterns in *j*[*/dz/*]-*g/k* are resolved in *jaynatrakans* [*/dzaynatrakans/*] “giving voice”: one strikes the semandron or releases the arrow and the sound ensues. This simple pattern then is elaborated in the poet’s fugue, where we encounter *cag* [*/tsag/*] “horizon”— where the sound reaches. But *cags tiezerac'* [*/tsags tiezerats'/*] is a phrase incorporating the word *ti+ezr* (pl.), lit. “divine boundaries”, i.e., “space, universe”; and in the second line is introduced a parallel and complementary expression, *tsirs ezerats'*, with the same *ts-r-ts'* pattern and loss of *g*. The word *tsir*, “line”, a loan from Hebrew, is paired with *ezr*, “boundary” in an earthly sense. So we have the bounds of heaven and the bounds of earth, parallel and rhymed in phonetic plays that are also kennings. Then come the *tsots's jurts'* “bosom(s) of the waters” with the same consonantal pattern but a shift of the vocal palette to deeper *o* and *u*. Heaven

and earth as a pair with the sea as a contrastive third element: the Narek echoes the Song of the Birth of Vahagn here in both content and linguistic play. But what of the “multitude of seas and their islands”? From his monastery he faced two islands at least, the royal isle of the Arcrunid dynasty, Aht‘amar, and the islet of Airtēr, where he prayed. But his sources are always both Armenian and Christian, native and Biblical; so the final lines must echo the series of cosmic Psalms beginning with 96.1, *Yiśmehū ha-šāmayim ve-tagēl hā-ārets, yir‘am ha-yam u-melo’ō* “May the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad, may the sea thunder and its entirety,” and 97.1, *Adonai malakh, tagēl hā-ārets, yiśmehū iyyīm rabbīm*, “God reigns, may the earth be glad, may the many islands rejoice.”

The semandron is consecrated in the Armenian Church; the rite was translated thus by Conybeare, and it dwells more on warning and wrath than on the pealing of good tidings:

“They wash it with water and then with wine; and deterge it and hold it before the holy altar. And they say eight [sic: read “six”] Psalms:

Psalm 98 O sing unto the Lord a new song
 Psalm 104 Bless the Lord, O my soul, O Lord my God
 Psalm 136 Let us confess to the Lord
 Psalm 138 I will be confessing thee, O Lord
 Psalm 142 With my voice I cried unto the Lord
 Psalm 146 Praise the Lord, O my soul

The Deacon proclaims:

Let us beseech in faith and concord
Thrice: Lord, have mercy.

The Priest saith the following prayer:

Lord God of hosts, and maker of all creatures. Thee do all creatures praise. Thee the trees praise, fruitful trees and all cedars [Psalm 148:9]. Thou because of thine infinite love of mankind wast pleased to dwell in the midst of our fathers (and didst converse with our fathers in the tent of witness) and to listen to their prayers. Thou hallowedst all the furniture of the tabernacle of holiness by the hand of Moses through sprinkling of blood. And now, O Lord our God, send the Grace of thy Holy Spirit into this wood, that it also may be brought nigh to and belong to the implements of the worship of thy Holy Church.

Give, Lord, grace to the voice of warning thereof, so that all who hear its noise may feel contrition in their hearts for the wrong they have done, and turn away from filthy thoughts and from all lawless words, and seek

forgiveness and remission of their sins. And thou in thy kindness shalt give ear and have mercy on them.

Give, Lord, grace to the voice of warning thereof, so that all who are afflicted with sickness or terrors of satan, and hear its noise, may remember thy holy and dread name, and entreat for mercy; thou shalt hear them, and alleviate and disperse all their woes.

Give, Lord, grace to the voice of warning thereof, that all who are in sorrow or other troubles, and hear its noise, may remember thy Holy Church and thy dread worship, and entreat of thee succour; and thou shalt hear them and disperse their troubles and griefs.

Give, Lord, grace to the voice of warning thereof, that when the clouds of wrath are massed together, and men hear the sound thereof, they may also remember thy terrible name, at which all creation doth tremble, and may entreat of thee indulgence towards their transgressions, and protection of their fields and of all their fruits. And thou shalt hear and have mercy on them, and avert the sentence of thy wrath. For thou art wont by means of trifling instruments of thy service to work mighty wonders.

Even as thou didst overthrow the wall of Jericho by means of the sound of a trumpet horn; so now vouchsafe by means of the noise of this to overthrow among us all the fortifications of the enemy, that we may be worthy to bless thee, Almighty God, now and ever and to eternity.

And then they bring it to the bema before the holy altar, the deacons holding it up. And the priest anoints with the chrism the four corners, and takes the semandron and strikes it thrice, and gives it to the attendant to beat. And forthwith they go into church for the office of the hour.”³⁷

So the semandron of Narek and of all the Armenian Church is a bell not made of metal but of the wood that furnished the Cross that sounds but does not ring; and it flies like an arrow across primordial Armenian sacral poetry and Biblical cosmology, attacking the archers of the satanic world-conqueror’s horde— a martial and probably contemporary image evoking the Central Asian marauders of Anatolia whose ruinous assault on civilization had barely begun. Of course both Sevak, and Ch‘arents‘, were raised on the Narek

³⁷ Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare, *Rituale Armenorum: being the Administration of the Sacraments and the Breviary Rites of the Armenian Church, together with the Greek Rites of Baptism and Epiphany; edited from the oldest manuscripts by F. C. Conybeare, M.A., F.B.A., late Fellow of University College; and the East Syrian Epiphany Rites, translated by the Rev. A. J. MacLean, D.D.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), pp. 38-39.

and never stopped studying it. We can see why, as well as how, with Poe, it inspired them. Even when Narekats'i's bells are made of wood they have a cosmic and moral power and a wealth of rich sound that Poe would have recognized and that Ochs and Dylan would have delighted in. But then, they did not know Armenian.

APPENDIX

In her groundbreaking monograph *In the World of Ch'arents'* Manuscripts (1978), the poet's daughter mentions a long draft:

Poem anvernagir

1. *Erazneri masin*

2. *Erazə*

3. *Banalin*

Ēst Ēdgar Po-i + Freyd

Sksvac ē 2-IV-1937, Erevan

Anno Domini MCMXXXVII

i t'wak. Hayk. R̄ Y J Ē

Eliše Č'arenc'

Melsabaro dpir, ergasan

"Poem without a title

1. On dreams

2. The dream

3. The key

According to Edgar Poe + Freud

Begun 2 April 1937, Erevan,

Anno Domini MCMXXXVII

in the Arm(enian) y(ear) 1387

Yeghishe Ch'arents'

Clerk of sinful ways and songster."³⁸

The poet wrote numerous drafts of the early stanzas of this projected major work and one overlapping with it, "Ulalume," without ever completing either poem, much less editing the rough drafts into a final version. The manuscripts were hidden from the police and suffered considerable damage over the years; so the lacunae are numerous. Part of the poem was published in 1983; the rest, in 1996.³⁹ I have brought the two parts together here.

³⁸ Anahit Ch'arents', *Č'arenc'i jeagreri ašxarhum* (In the World of Ch'arents' Manuscripts) (Erevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1978), p. 113.

³⁹ Ch'arents', *Antip ev č'havak'vac erker*, (Erevan: Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, 1983), pp. 666-668; Davit' Gasparyan, ed., *Eliše Č'arenc': Norahayt ēer* (Yeghishe Ch'arents'. Newly-Discovered Pages) (Erevan: Erevan University Press, 1996), pp. 314-320.

ULALUME

1. Introduction.

Concerning dreams.

Amazingly confused, absurd, and dark
I had of a sudden a dream this evening.
Silent, I had plunged into an abundantly beatific, immaterial,
Narcotic state. Strange, unwilling,
I was whirled in a blue ocean.
In my brain there was not a wisp of cloud, not a scintilla, eve, of care
That might agitate my spirit's imperturbability dark.
My eyes were closed, and weary, and stained with care,
But in all my being I remained awake.

Amazingly confused, absurd, and dark
I of a sudden this evening beheld a dream.
My eyes wide open, I was plunged into a waking sleep,
That was no dream, but an adventure fantastic
Or as it were delirium, that would seem to have no end,
Was not a sleep but a waking dream,
Like delirium, a curious adventure.

Amazingly confused, absurd, and dark
I saw all of a sudden a dream this evening:
Helpless, fallen into semi-wakeful sleep,
Rocked without will in a shoreless ocean,
I was interred and insensate remained
When from my terror I awoke, the delirium now calm,
But in my soul there stayed a wordless misty dark
That transported me, and...

I. O! morphine's boundless bliss,
The spirit's calm and shoreless weariness.
Ethereal as an impersonal sleep,
Dreaming exhaustion, egoless self...
I tasted that unconscious bliss
As if I'd slumbered and a soft, meek
Familiar being were rocking me
With its deceptive charm and unearthly song.

II. I've long grown familiar
With that strange and hapless yogic life,
And, sitting with my legs folded beneath me for hours,
I enjoy unbounded rest

Or dream long, like a limpid teardrop,
Like an unblemished conscience that cries...
But more than that brilliant reverie
I turn the pages of my endless past, its past,
And more than the distance of these visions
The chasm of the past it is that often takes me captive.

When for hours thus seated, legs folded beneath me,
Either I enjoy unbounded rest
Or the precincts and the lands of dreaming,
Certain I should never find myself in those climes severe...
Or shall I fashion songs, unreal and clear
As the tears of a wailing conscience.

2. For a long time now have I
Become familiar with this unreal life within my room.
For a long time now have I
Become accustomed to lie here night and day,
Or seated, all awake
In this sunless bed, this un <...> hour, passionless,
Solitude.
For a long time now have I
Grown accustomed to this strange and carefree, yogic life,
And seated thus crosslegged for hours,
Either I enjoy a shoreless calm
Or dream of works as clear as tears,
Like the tears of an unblemished conscience...

But more than this brilliant dreaming
I turn the pages of the past, of my infinite past...
Or I enjoy pure yogic rest
But more often than these sighing visions
The chasm of the past imprisons me...

2. For a long time now have I grown familiar
With this yogic life conferred upon me from above,
And for hours thus crosslegged seated
I enjoy either a pure and yogic rest,
That is, in silence I sit and for hours
I gaze at my navel, without pondering, without passion.

2. There is another diversion also, still more mindless,
That the endless perusal of the silence's book
When you know beforehand every incident,
Every chapter and citation, every page...

So that also I

2. For a long time now I've grown accustomed
To this unreal life given me from on high,
And seated thus crosslegged for hours
I enjoy a yogic peace.
That is, I sit in silence, motionless: for hours
I train my spirit like a passionless yogi,
Rising up and away from life and its petty passions
To gaze in silence for hours at my navel, as

For a long time now I've become accustomed
To the unreal life granted me from on high,
And on my bed seated crosslegged thus
I teach my wretched soul a yogic

2. For a long time now I've grown accustomed
To the unreal life given to me from above,
And seated thus crosslegged for hours
In order to sample yogic peace
I train my wretched spirit, that untroubled, certain,
Rising over life, passionless and free of feeling,
Simply— as is only proper to a yogi—
To gaze for hours in silence at my navel...

And on my bed seated thus, legs crossed,
I train my wretched spirit for the abstract and unpassioned
Final deep plunge into the looking glass,
For passionless and unattainable bliss...

2. Simply— I study, confident in my strength of will.
Simply— I compel myself, confident in patience
As is only proper to a yogi
To gaze in silence for hours at my navel...

3. And so? Do I attain that bliss?
Or, bored by the charmless spectacle of my navel,
Do I flatten the wall
Like a flood or a confused...
To fight all abstract puberty
And let my blood's <...>
Cursing this spirit's enslavement,
<...> every abstract peace
<...> from a bed without enchantment
<...> priceless

And <...> bewitches

3. And so? Do I reach that bliss,
Or, quickly tiring of my own navel,
Lunge, like a Tork⁴⁰ unchained,
Preferring to any abstract deed
An animal, mindless, <...> unsoulful
Sensuous joy, that from the navel
Floods abundant, roars, thunders, churns, tearing,
Like a bolt of lightning at the end of its existence...

3. And so? So I reach that higher bliss,
Or, worn out by this hard, dark occupation
Or, plainly in a dream, or by my own hand,
Tearing from my navel some sort of "thesis" fantastic
I tax my mind so that at last like
A man crazed having fallen into an endless labyrinth,
Who dully falls, and

4. Alas! How intimate and ever sacred for me was
Alone this precious bursting into flame,
But by a whim of fate— or was it only
Stupid human fanaticism, I was drawn away from life beneath the sun
To <...> this solitude,
By my identity's passionless <...> now,
Massacring the stormy daring of my spirit,
I grow used to another hollow fanaticism...

Alas! How intimate and ever
Agreeable alone to me this unconsumed burning,
Yet present, the bed, as an immovable stone,
Isolated from life, as a stranger

6. Sister Dian's shining chase does not <...>⁴¹
Emerging freshly onto the plain <...>
With boyish body, delicate and childlike,
Like the star-bright, light-spattered, sunlit sky

⁴⁰ Arm. *Tork' šht'ayazerc*: Tork' is a fearsome titan of Armenian mythology who could carve with his fingernails on stones and who cast huge boulders from the coast at the ships of invaders, see James R. Russell, "Polyphemos Armenios," *REArm* 26 (1996-7), pp. 25-38. Perhaps Ch'arents' conflates him here with the apocalyptic hero king Artawazd, who is chained till the end of days in the gorge of Mt. Ararat.

⁴¹ Cf. Poe's "Ulalume": "Astarte's bediamonded crescent,/ Distinct with its duplicate horn./ And I said, She is warmer than Dian," etc.

... And a golden arrow in your hand, carefree and still
With such sixteen-year-old⁴² hips clean and slim,
With boyish body, delicate, childlike,
Blue-eyed as the star-bright sunlit sky...

7. O my clear breaking dawn, my going swiftly
Still in advance of the sun, in that moment streaming milk
Like a lily pale when dawn awakens,
Opening milky-dark, and crescent moon colorless,
Bow of the soul, gripped and heated brow,
Silver-flecked like adamantite and naïve,
Star blinking, in amazement,
Dawns. Newly-come day, that ineffable beaming...
Morning star, enkindled, burning, lovely, beyond saying,
A day newly come, shines, shining day,
No way
New song
New life
New torch

9. What shall I do, my poor and helpless love,
Nairian my song, tragedy my fate,
Since your high ascent seemed poison
That your early anger never forgave
And the more you unfolded and the higher you went
All the more uncomprehending and unlucky and savage
All who did surround you at your untoward ardor

That seemed contempt to that black conclave,
Even your early service to that assemblage lofty...

(10)

By highest right that stems from your place of birth,
To those wretched hordes without a shred of talent...

That seemed contempt to that black conclave,
Even your early service to that assemblage lofty,
And the more you grew and the higher you soared,
So much the worse did you become for those independent of all graces,

⁴² He uses the marked Classical Armenian form *veštasnamya*, as in his poem on the beautiful Giovanni Beltraffio, whom Leonardo woke one night to draw the face of Christ, see James R. Russell, "The Armenian Counterculture That Never Was: Reflections on Eghishe Ch'arents'," *JSAS* 9 (1996-97 [1999]), p. 32.

By highest right that stems from a hidden place,
To those hordes who sit themselves down as masters...

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