

A NOTE ON THE BACKGROUND OF *HARATCH* AND SAROYAN'S WRITING TECHNIQUES

In the fall of 1980 Saroyan brought to my attention a number of unpublished plays only one of which, *The Armenians*, had been performed. During a discussion of some of his early works being studied by my class in Armenian-American literature at California State University, Fresno, Saroyan gave me a typescript of a play called *Haratch*, because, he said, I knew most of the characters in it through my Paris connection. He allowed a few photocopies to be made for the class, adding that this was the first time he had ever permitted anyone, let alone an entire university class in literature, to read an unpublished work. In a loud and emphatic voice he boasted the play was "the greatest ever written on the Armenians." The next day, October 2, he telephoned and apologized for his bravado about *Haratch's* being the greatest such work, yet commenting, "It is still a good play, and perhaps even great."

During the next three weeks my class discussed the play in minute detail. After each session I would relate to Saroyan the various comments and reactions to it. The students were immediately struck not just by the breadth of Saroyan's knowledge of Armenian affairs, but by the mechanics of the play's composition. Whether consciously or instinctively William Saroyan was a great practitioner of the art of the colophon, a millenia old ritual among Armenians. Like Armenian scribes, stone masons, and artisans from the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the fifth century to our own day, he ritualistically recorded on every piece of paper he typed, wrote, or painted, a precise inscription formula containing his name, the place of execution, the date, the day of the week, often the hour of beginning and ending of writing, and at times a terse commentary. Thus, the typescript of *Haratch* reveals very clearly that its 30 pages were written in exactly 30 consecutive days from June 23 to July 22, 1979, at 74 rue Taitbout, Paris. Each page, bearing some 800 to 900 words, is typed, single-spaced to the very bottom with virtually no margins. An average of 20 minutes, usually in the early afternoon, was spent on each day's page. He had always prided himself on being a skilled typist, something he learned in his early teens at the Fresno vocation school after he decided he would become a writer. His speed was remarkable. Working without the aid of preliminary notes or a draft, he produced 30-40 words a minute including the time for the formulation of his thoughts. The typescript is relatively free of syntactical, grammatical, or mechanical errors.

It might be assumed that such a technique would lead to an episodic work, but Saroyan's innate mastery of words and ideas keeps the play together as a unified whole. No doubt when the play is published it will not reveal this underlying peculiarity of composition. The class was just as eager as I was to find out why Saroyan chose this way of working. It was widely known—he was fond of bragging about it—that from his earliest writings Saroyan would set up rigorous challenge-schedules, somewhat like Handel writing the Messiah in



17 days. His first collection of stories, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1934), consisted of 33 stories written in 33 days; *The Time of Your Life* was completed in a New York hotel room in six days, *Hello Out There* (1941) in a single night; and *Haratch*, the Armenian play, in exactly 30 days. But how was one to explain his working on the play for only 15 to 20 minutes each day? When I asked him about this, he spoke at some length on the phenomenon: "That summer *Haratch* was one of seven works that I was creating. When I write I prefer not to be obsessed night and day by any one work. By laboring on several at one time, at the same time, I don't know which one to think about at the end of my day's writing and, therefore, I think of none of them consciously, but allow them to just be there as I take my walk or eat or visit or just sleep." During our very last conversation in Fresno on Christmas Eve, 1980, before I left for Paris, he brought up the subject once again, "A play must be an accumulated story." That is exactly what he did with *Haratch*: he accumulated its parts, its ideas, not just during those 30 days, but really throughout his life.

Like *The Armenians*, *Bitlis*, and *Is There Going to Be a Wedding?* the typescript of *Haratch* contains no stage directions. Saroyan attached great importance to the role of the director. He often commented that his plays needed the right person successfully to interpret them and bring them to life. He expressed his disappointment about the only production of any of these plays, that of *The Armenians*. Though he was not present for its performance he had a tape recording about which he commented, "The director was off-base, he had the characters get too shrill, a bogus trick. Armenians are not shrill. Elia Kazan uses that trick too, everybody jumping up and down and all of it very shrill." He added whimsically, "These plays have to be produced and directed either by me or Dickran Kouymjian or some Armenian who is well acquainted with me." I was quick to reply that thus far I had not ventured into the theater and then suggested the obvious Armenian directors in America and abroad who might understand the work. I told him I would try to arrange a reading of *Haratch* in Paris or back in the U.S. in the following autumn. This essay serves as a temporary substitute for that promise.