Deviations: A Translator's Notes on Shushan Avagyan's *Book-Untitled*

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"*I BEG YOU, PLEASE DON'T DISTORT THE ESSENCE AND MEANING of the work! / Don't make it 'comprehensible'!*" (125) With this demand to preserve both the inescapable 'strangeness' of a foreign text in translation, as well as to expose the patriarchal contours of the Armenian literary canon, Shushan Avagyan's *Girq-Anvernagir* [*Book-Untitled*] writes the very distortion it seeks to uncover. What, then, is her English translator to do when, wanting to do justice to the Armenian text, that same text speaks sensitively and beseechingly *against* distortion, while simultaneously declaring that amongst its many aims, its "one [primary] purpose… is to *deviate* from the original aim" (15)?

Girq-Anvernagir was published by the *Heghinakayin Hratarakutyun* Press in Yerevan in 2006. The book's cover image—two black, empty iron cast chairs sitting around a matching black table and set slightly to the left—meets the eye against a minimalist red and white backdrop, setting the stage for an unassuming 127 pages divided into 26.5 chapters composed in Eastern Armenian.

Written as a literary experiment while its author was simultaneously translating the poems of Shushanik Kurghinian into English, *Girq-Anvernagir* reads on its surface as a translator's diary. However, through seemingly un-related and fragmented vignettes in disparate and un-identified voices, the reader discovers that Avagyan is actually mapping out a larger archival or archeological site. The book's first chapter, "Preface, or We as Two Separate Planets,"[1] draws our map: an imagined encounter between two early twentieth-century feminist writers, Zabel

Yesayan and Shushanik Kurghinian, whose legacies have largely been obscured and forgotten.[2] Juxtaposed to this imagined encounter is a conversation between the author and her friend Lara, along with the letters they uncovered as they sifted through the archives of various state institutions in Yerevan to piece together the stories of Yesayan and Kurghinan. Finally, *Girq-Anvernagir* also offers Avagyan's own commentary on censorship, translation, and the lost legacies of feminist authors in the Armenian literary and historical canon.

"In the lobby of the state university, busts of all the beloved figures are arranged. 'But where is she?' asks Lara. 'Why isn't her bust there?' / I'm answering with this book," (16) writes Avagyan, recalling her search with Lara for the bust of Zabel Yesayan. "If we could have recovered all the pages that had been torn, burnt and destroyed by the critics, the libraries would simply be overflowing" (13). How might the modern Armenian woman or feminist recognize herself through the history presented to her by a patriarchal society, which according to Vahan Ishkhanian in *Girq*'s Introduction (6) is a history of deception in which women's ideas of their emancipation in Armenia are destroyed? If these legacies had been nourished instead of obscured, how might our historical narrative be different? Had there been uncensored access to some of its early writers, might the development of feminism in an Armenian context have been different? These are just some of the stakes of Avagyan's experiment. Readers accompany Avagyan with these questions, sifting through their fragments buried in the ruins of a destroyed plot.

"Literature is a weapon to struggle against injustice," wrote Zabel Yesayan. In Avagyan's contemporary response to the literary canon's erasure of Yesayan and Kurghinian, *Girq* takes Yesayan's task to arms by formally mimicking the very erasure and distortion of the canon that it criticizes. *Girq* autocensors through the use of ****, plagiarizes poetry, and uncovers lost h(er)stories. In doing so, *Girq* performs various forms of censorship and provokes the question of "who can author?" to echo the male-dominated (heteropatriarchal) historiography to which it responds. This historiography has written the two revolutionary authors/protagonists as domestic fixtures who remained behind the closed doors of "tradition" and domestication, having been instrumentalized as Soviet propaganda and/or Armenian nationalism whilst largely

ignoring their contribution to feminist, political and aesthetic thought in a transnational Armenian milieu.

Through the weaving in and out of *Girq*'s fragmented, postmodern pastiche and its polyphony of voices, it is difficult at times to keep track of *who* is speaking, or whose words are being cited/appropriated. Several of *Girq*'s chapters, for example, bear the names of Kurghinian's poems, yet they remain unmarked, and the reader is left to wonder who has authored these lines. Taking a feminist socialist stance, Avagyan suggests that not citing authors, essentially 'plagiarizing' their work, 'deprivatizes' words, enabling them to belong instead to a plurality of interpretations, narratives and possibilities:

> Sometimes, reader, the typist/writer forgets to put parenthesis around cited words or sentences. / Does that mean that she steals another's words? / Which is worse: to let the vivid words of the poet die in damp boxes in dark and ambushed rooms or to sow them like seeds, mixed with other words, to revive them, letting them bloom in unnamed fields? / Besides, the parenthesis privatize the words and make them someone else's property. / The words belong neither to the typist/writer nor to you, reader. / They simply unite our past, present and future (106).

Yet aren't we still curious to know which chapter titles are echoes of Kurghinian's poetry? Which poetic verses 'belong' to Avagyan? Which words are Yesayan's, which Kurghinian's? And are there still others? Avagyan refuses to answer these questions for her readers, instead challenging us to be archeologists along with her and ask: under which circumstances does one acquire the right to claim authorial voice? How does authorship invoke ownership, and how might that reproduce (capitalist) male hegemony? Can we divest that power of ownership by refusing to play by its rules, and not cite authors? How might History and the archive also be privatized and affected by that hegemonic patriarchal reproduction? As such, to what extent has History been edited and distorted, and thus what might a subversion of distortion *through* distortion look like?

Three major narrative layers unfold to address these questions: the first, the recovery of silenced archival traces of Yesayan and Kurghinian;

the second, the reconnaissance work of two contemporary women as they uncover the archive's violence in censoring material, and then their *imagining* of what could have been a conversation between Yesayan and Kurghinian (animating the gaps and silences of the archive beyond what its patriarchal contours might allow); the third, *Girq's* diary-entry type prose, reflecting on the violent editorial censorship its author experiences as a translator, which parallels the historical censorship of Yesayan and Kurghinian. Each of these layers contributes to Avagyan's commentary on erasure.

Enacting autocensorship on her own text to reflect this violence, Avagyan performatively and provocatively parallels the historical censorship of her authors, encouraging her reader to question it:

> Anyway, reader, know that this book arrives to you half full. / In the lines you see the (*) mark, know that in these parts the most influential words from the original text have been removed. / Every book, especially a collection of translated poems, goes through a "cleansing" process. / For you, reader, because apparently the editors know (and know well) what you need, in what quantity and in what way. (121)

Throughout *Girq*, the reader will encounter the *******, the ------ or ~~the crossed-out sentence.~~ The historical "cleansing" processes to which Avagyan alludes above are the censored letters Yesayan wrote to her daughter Sophie whilst in prison. Though written ambiguously to guard against being seized and destroyed by prison authorities, her letters were nonetheless inspected, "edited," and reappropriated by her Soviet "Investigators" before they were sent. Still, we then might ask, is Avagyan presenting us with "real" historical documents, or are these figments of her own imagination? In this juxtaposing of history with the present, Avagyan offers a strong commentary on the Editing/Publishing institution itself as being contaminated by market values in its conception of readers as consumers rather than questioners, ultimately leading to a text's contamination. "A lot of things are missing," she writes. "For example, two sentences from this chapter are missing. / The most critical parts are missing, but you, my good reader, don't notice it. / You don't ask questions" (35). Thus, Avagyan provokes us to be active readers who dig through and challenge the layered silencings of and deviations from the

past. And according to Avagyan, "you can't find the truth… unless you deviate…" (121).

Through writing, theorizing about, and imagining a story full of archival gaps with a work of experimental (auto)biographical postmodern theory and historical-fiction, Avagyan presents us with a new kind of story, one that connects the legacies of the past with stakes in the present. Still, that story does not dictate or define for us what those connections might be. History, as Saidiya Hartman wrote in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts," "pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive,"[3] yet we must remember that the archive is itself a result of an *edited* hegemonic narrative—one that has cherry-picked who gets represented in History, and how. Instead, creative writing about archival material might allow the very fiction of History to be intensified, perhaps also unchaining us from the steadfast protection of history as fixed, or its archive as definitive. *Girq*'s creative project predates Hartman's similar concept of "critical fabulation"[4] by two years, mixing archival research, theory, and creative writing to imagine how the disappeared will be re-membered into history through interpretation. As Avagyan suggests, this prompts a reader each time to "re-find" more of what is concealed: "Someone will remember the disappeared, and while remembering, will write verses dedicated to them. And yet another while reading those verses will re-member them. / The loss of one thing will help re-find another." Avagyan frames this writing-remembering process as inherently deviant itself: "A book that, throughout its creation, changes and distances itself from its original aim…Whatever's impossible to solve in reality, I'm trying at least to understand by writing" (124).

My process of translating *Girq* also participated in Avagyan's experiment of multi-authorship. I confronted what opening up a story from one language to the next might mean for the book's project. If we can compare Avagyan's multi-voiced, multi-genre text to Bakhtin's heteroglossic imagination, where "another's speech in another's language…express(es) authorial intentions [through] refract[ion],"[5] then *translation* may also be a deviation that allows the translator to be an equal player in the creation of a new text—giving, as Benjamin famously wrote, the text's afterlife, or perhaps a new life altogether.[6]

Avagyan's formal and thematic deviations encouraged me as her translator to do the same, and thus, deviation became the politics of my own translation of *Girq*. "To comprehend something new it's necessary to learn another language, the customs, the culture… in a word, to live another way of life," (28) writes Avagyan. Yet, how to translate concepts into English that Avagyan has coined in Armenian? For example, *batsa-hayt(naber)el*): literally "open-seen/known(bring it forth)," and in translation, either "ex-tract(plain)" or "dis-cover/un-cover/un-fold" (85). What new meanings in English might my translation choices have unfolded? Avagyan herself once explained the term "ex-tract(plain)" to me, perhaps translatable as the "discovery through exposition..." In this moment of being lost *between* the translations, the loss of one thing might help to re-find another. Ultimately, reading *Girq* in English translation becomes an event through which a new language again calls upon Avagyan's reader, as the author, translator and reader re-create words to re-create a story. Through the inherent deviation of translation itself, we are thus reminded of the aim of un-archiving in *Girq*: "Re-assume. Re-analyze. Re-remember" (31) in order to "ex-tract(plain)" or "dis-cover/un-cover" (85).

Due to the constraints and codes of the English language, I also made opaque political choices in my translation, exposing my own political agenda as a reader of *Girq*. The translation of the ever-looming, gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun, *na* (Eastern Armenian variant), also required deviation from the original text. Mostly because of the text's fragmented nature which maintains its purposeful narratological ambiguity, *na*'s referent is oftentimes lost. Giving gender to *na* in any gender-ambiguous passage (and there are several) would have risked writing an assumed gender-relationality or sexual-timbre into a scene. What's more, *assigning* a gender to *na* in this circumstance would be to write out its ambiguity in the Armenian. In this circumstance, what kinds of possibilities might a queer translation of the ambiguous *na* offer us?

While certain theories of translation seek to domesticate a text so that it does not, to use the Turkish saying, "smell like translation" (çeviri kokuyor), my translation leans instead towards a praxis of de-domestication. Instead of assigning gender to the *na*s in gender-ambiguous passages, I chose to *further* highlight the gender-ambiguity

of the text beyond the subtly of the original by translating *na*, unless otherwise clear, as "they"—a pronoun used in gender-queer, English-speaking circles to obviate the inscription of gender in the English third-person "he" or "she." However, what my choice heralds is a distortion or censoring of the original Armenian's queerly comfortable ambiguity. The text itself conveniently autocensors its gender-ambiguity in the love letters and dialogues interspersed throughout *Girq*. Unable to sustain the text's original ambiguity without writing gender and reproducing a heteropatriarchal reading, the translator is forced to make a political linguistic choice that exposes her and the text as translation. Certainly, this choice reveals my own political subjectivity, a Shklovskian "estranging" of the English version as I write against English grammar and interject a queer framework of gender-ambiguous possibility. While this choice might bring the text away from its own subtle ambiguities, it *also* opens it up to new readings beyond what, in this case, the original Armenian might immediately offer. And, perhaps, this praxis remains in the spirit of Avagyan's project: "You can't find the truth, Lara, unless you deviate" (121).

Girq deviates politically and aesthetically vis-à-vis the questions it poses on authorship, censorship and plagiarism, demonstrating how literature written in Armenian can also question the Western-born neoliberal market's effects on aesthetic practice. *Girq*'s queries into the potential merits that a different political system—a socialist (feminist) one, perhaps—based more on collectivity and polyphony than individualist "democracies," might have. As Barthes claimed, the text writes him. There is no ownership *over* the text; to the contrary, it is the text—master of one—that reigns over its readers.[7]

Girq-Anvernagir, with its formal, historical and thematic deviations, its many (women) authors—including its translator—views writing and history as belonging to readers and their interpretations instead of as the sole mechanism of the author, historian, editor, translator or publishing house. For Armenian Studies, this may suggest a shift in focus to include contemporary literary production in the Armenian transnation instead of the majority of focus on classical, medieval or pre-1915 texts. Contemporary production has re-enlivened what is often the site of anxiety—an endangered Armenian language and literature. New texts,

including *Girq-Anvernagir,* look forward with much to share about how contemporary (feminist) artists and authors understand and criticize society, the hegemonic paradigms of the history that has inscribed them, gender hierarchy, nation-state aspirations and nationalisms in the post-Soviet and Diasporic contexts. If there is a past to be honored, it can only be rendered more significant in the continued attention we give to contemporary works lest they, like Kurghinian and Yesayan, also be rendered insignificant.

And so, what does it mean to take on a queer praxis of translation? Does this mean that the translator herself embeds the text with 'queerness' where there once was none? And does this occur just by virtue of making certain choices about how to translate ambiguous gender pronouns? If not – and I think these understandings are insufficient – what makes a text "queer"? For Eve Sedgwick, queer is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically,"[8] If we can read "gender" as a type of "genre," then how might we consider the very genre of Avagyan's book as an embodiment of Sedgwick's call for possibility? Perhaps it could be considered a pushback against historical monolithic patriarchal significations by exposing *Girq*'s readers to the tensions between the patriarchal archive of the Armenian literary canon, the hegemonic Editing/History writing process that has obscured Yesayan and Kurghinian, and what might be (im)possible to imagine and excavate for *us* when we open up that mesh of possibilities, gaps, excesses and dissonances.

Avagyan's project is careful not to re-prescribe the legacies of Yesayan and Kurghinian, but to re-mind us of our possibility to un-fix them from their archival stagnation: to see just how much *one small* opening up of an archive can disrupt the resolute foundation of patriarchal History. In this way, reading *Girq-Anvernagir* through the lens of queer theory might guide us in reading its challenges not as a dismantling of History so much as a challenge to the possibilities of the archive and History when they can be stretched and expanded beyond their fixed, past-oriented foci. Leaving us with open provocations instead of hermetic answers, *Girq* pushes us not only to ask *what else remains,* but also, *how might each new*

excavation herald another plethora of re-discoveries, alternate readings, and other possibilities for new aesthetic, social and political paradigms?

NOTES

1 The current English version of *Girq-Anvernagir* [*Book-Untitled*] is seeking a publisher. You can read the first chapter in English, "Preface, or We as Two Separate Planets," published on the Words Without Borders website (April 2015 issue): http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/preface-or-we-as-two-separate-planets. Translator: Deanna Cachoian-Schanz

2 At the time of its publication in 2006, *Girq-Anvernagir* was one of the few published books that explicitly focused on the literary legacies of Zabel Yesayan (especially in a book of creative writing) and of Shushanik Kurghinian. After Victoria Rowe's 2003 *A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880-1922*, Avagyan's 2005 publication of *I Want to Live: The Poetry of Shushanik Kurghinian* by AIWA press, Melissa Bilal and Lerna Ekmekçio lu's 2006 *Bir Adalet Feryadı: Osmalı'dan Türkiye'ye Be Ermeni Feminist Yazar (1862—1933) [A Cry for Justice: Five Armenian Feminist Writers from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic (1862-1933)]* (Istanbul: Aras Publishing) and Lara Aharonian and Talin Suciyan's 2008 documentary film *Finding Zabel Yesayan*, the floodgates have been opened to a renewed interest in and publication of Armenian women's writing by various translators and scholars.

3 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus In Two Acts," *Small* Axe 26, no. 7 (2008): 9.

4 Hartman, "Venus In Two Acts," 11.

5 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

6 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 69-82.

7 Barthes Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-148.

8 Eve K. Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.