



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*From The Women of Zarubyan Street*

Shushan Avagyan, Lucine Talalyan, Deanna Cachoian-Schanz

The Hopkins Review, Volume 18, Number 1, Winter 2025, pp. 81-95 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2025.a952170>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/952170>

**Shushan Avagyan and lucine talalyan****From *The Women of Zarubyan Street****translated from the Armenian by Deanna Cachoian-Schanz***TRANSLATOR'S NOTE**

Descending upon you like Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, *Zarubyan kanayq* represents the mastery of Avagyan's prose and defamiliarizing language play, expanding beyond text to image through the deft lens of lucine talalyan and the misty pull of her blurred photographs on the Soviet Praktica LTL3 camera. This style of writing—nonlinear and intertextually fragmented—is new in Eastern Armenian-language literature, an innovation that has attracted and influenced other contemporary Armenian writers, like Aram Pachyan and Anna Davtyan. Yet no contemporary Armenian novel has attempted to create a multiperspectival dialogue of form between text and image, rendering Avagyan and talalyan's photographic novel a pioneering work in the Armenian literary canon.

This translated excerpt includes the prologue and the beginning of "Part One: Eccentric Women." As in the outset of her first novel, *A Book, Untitled* (Awst and Tilted Axis Press, 2023), Avagyan offers a map to the novel's complex terrain, the unnamed narrator clarifying from the beginning that the title of the book refers to a street in Yerevan that has been renamed from the Soviet-era Plekhanov Street to the post-Soviet-era Zarubyan Street. The novel is set in this post-Soviet moment of transition (late 2000s) in which the characters—the women artists in the photos inhabiting (and making livable) Zarubyan Street—are trying to understand themselves in this supposedly new era of independence and freedom, only to find out that the Soviet past persistently haunts them and their works. The characters mentioned only briefly here appear later in the novel—under either the same or different names—but identifiable as one and the same. Donning performative guise, the "real-life" characters of lucine will appear as the Old Sailor and Arax as Heghine in a play that the women perform toward the middle of the novel, changing the novel's turn of events through the play while they also try to make sense of their own relationship. In this excerpt, the novel announces its style and genre: it's not composed of a conventional, linear narrative but rather is an experimental piece of writing. The excerpt continues with the opening pages of "Part One: Eccentric Women," in

which the narrator, not yet identified, shares that she has been asked to write about the forgotten painter Arax Nerkararyan, who was a part of the 3rd Floor artist movement in Yerevan from 1987 to 1994. Through the haze of muddled memories, she begins to conjure Arax and the moment of her rise in Yerevan's art world in the early 1990s. Here, the narrator also recalls a near-absurd conversation between two supposed literary critics, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_: connoisseurs who, left unnamed, typify the critic or literary historian and who give their interpretations and opinions of the present novel without even having read the work. The excerpt comes to a close with lucine and the narrator trying to remember Arax at one of her exhibitions.



## BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

*The Women of Zarubyan Street* is composed entirely of citations—direct and indirect—which recount events that have taken place either in reality or in the imagination. I have simply placed and arranged them in a unique and precise way.

—Shushan Avagyan

This is the story of a photograph which, over the years, had become invisible. Filtering through the photograph pierced the patterns of the wallpaper.

—lucine talalyan

This senseless mist, where shadows whirl,  
how could I pierce it?

—Raymond Queneau

## PROLOGUE

When the streets are renamed and their names are changed from one name to another, when on some random day in some ministry, some deputy minister signs some document, and in some other office—most likely on the second or third floor of the municipality building—some other (anonymous) secretary seals the document with their blue stamp on which one simple instruction is written in printed letters, composed of words so simple that truly nothing revolutionary can ever be rendered from them—a stamp bearing a simple message: such-and-such street is renamed Zarubyan, and on a random November day the street, which for almost seventy years bore another name, is suddenly renamed not Apcar, Shahinyan, Yesayan, Kurghinian, Dussap, or any other name but Zarubyan—renamed in a matter of just one day, a day when, according to habit, the trees that grow on its sidewalks change colors and some of them, having already lost their leaves, uncover the street sign so that suddenly one day someone in the neighborhood notices that the (rusty white) street sign hidden behind the leaves no more bears its familiar name, and instead of Plekhanov there's another name, also composed of eight letters—eight simple letters that together make up someone else's name. From here, questions arise.

The journalist writes news articles that are then called stories in which they copy incidents that have occurred in real life, absurd quotidian and everyday events—in a word, press releases and gossip columns in which they unequivocally give precedence to the content and in which, without the content, the meaning of the writing gets lost; yet the journalist asserts their



perspective and writes persistently, demanding a place in the pages of literature.

What is the true address of this displaced sentence? It wasn't intended as the book's opening lines.

If the sentence is to be ordered beforehand, for whom is it being ordered, and is it really possible to modify that order, and is it possible that the order of the sentence is reordered so that it becomes a main order or a counter-order? If we completely reordered what was preordered for us, might we lose the sentence's meaning—lose that sequence of events so important to the journalist's story?

This dependence is unequivocal: the journalist will faithfully transcribe (their)eality and (their)eal fact, while Yuri Tynjanov will ask,

“What is a literary fact?”

If a book—that is, writing, or thought expressed through writing, that's constantly (being) reordered—digressing and repeating, being forgotten and forgetting its original direction, and then counter-ordering itself—elides letters and becomes invalid—that is, unrealized or, rather, realized—then the only thing that remains is to simply add, among other things, that this work is based on a sentence and its de-orderings whose address is 34 Zarubyan Street.

(lucine)

We cross the street in conversation; the cars don't yield, but with a calm stride, one foot outstretched and her face to the sun, she holds my arm firmly (the cars speed by us furiously) and, looking quickly in both directions, gets us safely to the other side.

The violation has nothing to do with the traffic laws.

Aristotle writes in *Poetics* that there are four basic elements to the writing of characters in a tragedy. The first is that the characters are morally right,



proper, and truthful, and since women are neither that proper nor truthful, they cannot play the part of the virtuous hero. Second, the characters are exceptional: for example, you can describe a given character by his virile properties, but it's not fitting—rather, it wouldn't be appropriate for a woman character, that is, for example, if for

whatever reason one of the characters (a woman) in a tragedy wore a man's trousers, shirt, and tie—let's say, to visualize it, black trousers, a yellow shirt, and a striped tie (this, of course, for the sake of assumption only)—for Aristotle, it'd be unacceptable, in a word, bad. Third, make the characters true to life, breathe them with life, and fourth, the characters must be compatible and consistent.

But here I must remind you, dear reader, that this work is not a tragedy.

(The woman and the American editor)

They are sitting in a café, to the right of the glass entrance. Cold, snowy air blows in each time the door opens. Old placards line the wall.

"I don't understand Arax's character; it's utterly lifeless and interferes when trying to follow the other characters' actions and, in general, the overall events of the novel."

"The book isn't about her," the woman responds.

The editor fiddles with his grey hat, then pulls it further down his forehead and looks crossly at the stiff, freezing bodies of the passersby.

"The works," the woman continues, "that Arax Nerkararyan has left, like the works of Pierre Menard, can be listed easily and briefly. So, it's impossible to forgive the omissions and superfluities in the art critic's article and that the well-known magazine, whose Republican tendencies are no secret to anyone, imposed on its poor readers, insulting their intelligence. Arax's true friends accepted the article apprehensively and with a certain sense of melancholy. It was only







yesterday that we'd gather and discuss the meaning of her work, and now ignorance tries to distort it. My brief rectification was clearly necessary."

(Old Sailor)

When she wants to (tries to) communicate something to me (absorbed in thought for days, she finally tells me an unrelated story from

which I have to try to discern, to translate, to understand what it is she wants to express, what it is she wants to say, which is impossible to communicate directly, immediately), she tells a story, obliquely.

Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. "Stop!" cried the old man at last, "I didn't drag my father beyond the fence."

It's difficult to overcome the temperament we're born with. When we're young we try to be sensible, proper, and there's nothing more intolerable than when we see (chiseled in capital letters) our own flaws in others and then start fighting against them with a vengeance from within. But the years pass, we grow older, and we see that those (our) flaws are the most harmless of all other vices, and in some cases they're even charming, and our struggle against them slowly dies away.

She wipes the dust from her black trousers and straightens her striped tie.

Half sitting, I observe her movements and write everything down.

She finds me like that, half reclining (half sitting) on one of the chairs, and announces loudly over a loudspeaker that she wants to remove this row of chairs and bring it to 34 Zarubyan Street.

Half sitting for a few minutes, wrapped in my red shawl—and it's so cold there in the circus yard in November—with my shawl over my shoulders, like Heghine half reclining, I was waiting.

I was waiting to see, Who would be the first one to find me? Who would bring me home?

## Part One: Eccentric Women

She wanted. Trying, trialing, and having been tried. She wanted me to start, but how do they begin at all, by beginning and composing, by erasing and beginning? This is certainly not the one that came before. This is a new book. Not newly but specially written and written alluringly, having declared and by declaring that it is new and exceptional. Remaining distinct and distinctive from the one that came before since it has a distinctly resolved title and address.

Arax's canvases leaned against the office wall. That should be the beginning. The novel's inevitable beginning that begins like this: "Arax Nerkararyan's canvases leaned against the wall."

She wants me to write about Arax. She expresses a wish.

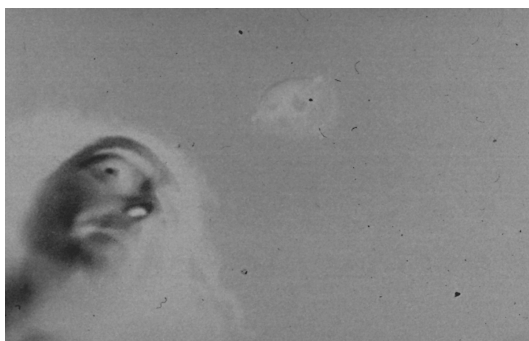
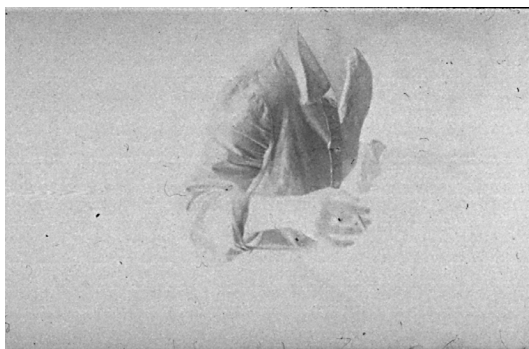
Then she adds, Beginning is not easy. She doesn't know how to begin something that can already be considered as having already begun. It should be noted that even from the beginning she was trying to do everything gently and not so suddenly.

There were no desks in Comrade Martirosyan's classroom, which was on the third floor of the building just a few doors away from the teachers' lounge. Revolving chairs sat atop the raised iron pedestals that lined the wall's perimeter. Between classes she'd force us out into the hallway.

In those years we had two options: to sit in Comrade Martirosyan's English literature class or to learn typing in Comrade Kupalyan's workshop in the hopes of becoming trained secretaries.

After the bell, when we'd return to the classroom.

During the break, she'd lock her-



self in the classroom with the revolving armchairs. When we'd come back, smoke rings still billowed in the rays of the sun that pierced from between the curtains. Every day and almost every day.

We were reading Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*. Then another strange book. Reading and through reading, we could feel black semicircles forming under our eyes.

Sometimes Comrade Martirosyan would let us listen to Nina Simone. On those days, many students were absent. They'd go to the Opera to join the demonstrations. Listen! and by listening, write! and by writing, wake up! and in that moment of awakening, Comrade Martirosyan would say, Everything is unconventional. Sitting on the rotating armchairs and breathing in the lingering smoke, we'd listen without understanding the lyrics but could feel the voice's disruptive possibilities in that moment and in the moments that followed. We weren't thinking of the arrested.

Perhaps the reader would like the book to begin like this, written "sincerely." So sincerely, in fact, that it would be open to itself, so that it wouldn't dare fake itself but speak from life's experience, be spontaneous.

But here, in this book, I'm definitely talking about a non-journalistic beginning; here, in these pages, I need to find a new beginning.

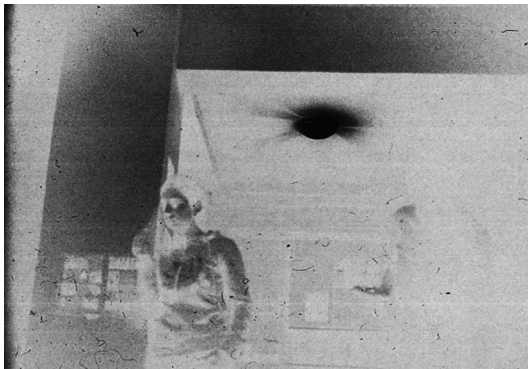
The new has nothing to do with sincerity.

Maybe it refutes memory. Maybe it plans the future. Maybe in the new you'll find disappointment, reader, and disappointed, you'll close this book. Maybe that sentence is created with the new, a sentence whose task is to rename that which has already been named a thousand and one times before. The new is restless. A wanderer, it seems—useless. The new is extravagant and capricious; it

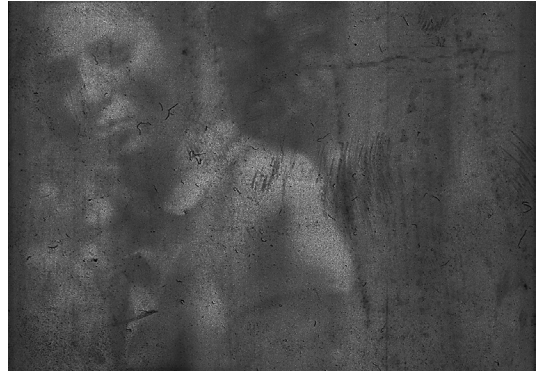
wastes your time and tries everyone's patience. It is unusual, strange, and eccentric. And maybe in the new is the exceptional, which is at once incredibly exciting and dangerous.

Out of civility, it's already been said and will be said in the coming pages.

Any character in this book can suddenly yield their place to another



or change their name, be renamed and transformed; they constantly require new passports to cross the borders of genre. So, it's impossible to write down or convey everything that they intend to say or think or that they are thinking or intending to say but that they're keeping in their minds and not saying or that they know and are just concealing or not concealing.



Out of civility, but of which ci(vili)ty? According to the behaviors of which city, or suitable for whom, and why should we rely on the behaviors and customs of (that) one city?

But this beginning is the same as all the others. It's uneasy, and that uneasiness is also passed on to us because it comes from the need to do something that will put an end to what has become ordinary in our daily lives.

\* \* \*

"Have you read \_\_\_\_\_'s new novel, what was the title . . . I can't remember now. *Inknagir* is publishing it in installments."

"What novel?"

"I don't remember the title. I think *A Book of the Constitution* . . . I'm not sure, but as I remember, it had a fixed title, it was clearly purposeful this time."

"Clearly what? Who's read it?"

"\_\_\_\_\_. He was saying that while it's true that the novel is a dialogue with itself, it still integrates the reader and is dedicated to loved ones."

"And. . .?"

"And it's really important when in the beginning or end of the book, but better in the beginning, the writer states what they're writing for and why they needed to write that book. . . ."

"But—when it comes to you—what do you think, what's your opinion?"

"To be frank, I haven't read it, but \_\_\_\_\_ was saying that every fragment of her writing absorbs the reader, which can be chalked up to her innate talent. Yesterday at Ketiknots Café, the hangout near the Saryan statue . . . he was



arguing with \_\_\_\_.”

“About what. . . ?”

“Well, \_\_\_\_ was saying that each of her fragments—I mean, you know, she writes in fragments—that her writing ‘flows like a stream’. . . .”

“A stream? . . . if she writes in fragments. . . .”

“Well, for that reason \_\_\_\_ was saying, and of course \_\_\_\_ didn’t agree, but anyway \_\_\_\_ was saying that what she has to say becomes a word, and that word—a text, and that text, in turn, a path to the inner world of the writer. . . .”

“What? . . . what nonsense. . . .”

\* \* \*

But we all are interested in the lives of geniuses and write their biographies, write how it is we want to see them, how we imagine them, and so we create them ourselves, our geniuses, just like, for example, how Thomas Moore was interested in the life of Byron and wrote his biography, burning his letters

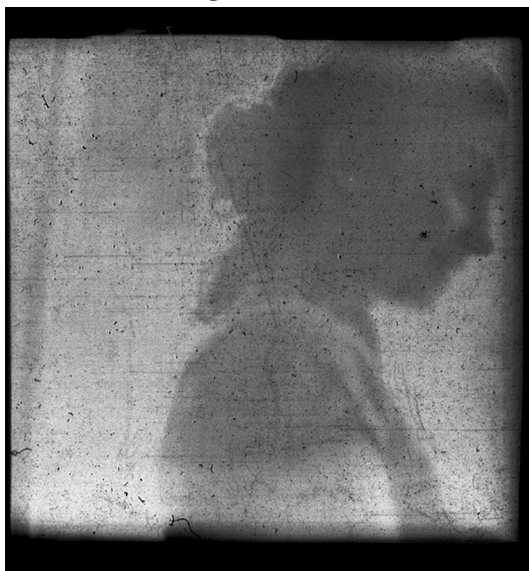
and memoirs, or how Avetik Isahakyan was enamored with Charents, timidly burning his manuscripts, and we print books, build libraries, polish statues and idolize them, and by idolizing them also idolize ourselves and our own superiority because we know what a genius is, because we understand the difference, and because we can give meaning to that difference. In any case, this book doesn’t want to be read as a biography; it doesn’t aspire to become a sincerely and persuasively written text. At best, it will form into a translation. Or maybe it is already forming.



*Describe, she says, scribe her image, imaginatively, descriptively. Write about Arax. What is a description if not a desire? I want you to write, and by writing, make me remember, but in a new way so that I understand again, so that I feel her presence, and then her absence, and then the anxiety of that absent presence that envelops me. Now, at this very moment, in this very line, you are creating that vague feeling of doubt that I'm waiting in vain, anticipating, that I'm going to be disappointed, that there isn't going to be a description, that you don't have the ability to write her, because you understand, you know, you feel vaguely that you're going to fail, and only like that, by understanding and feeling, and to understand and to feel untranslatable.*

After the bell, when we would return to the classroom.

But in 1991 we didn't have a choice. Many of us were burning books in our apartments, and it's possible that one of those (burning) books could have been none other than that strange book that would bring out the dark semicircles under our eyes, but in Comrade Martirosyan's classroom, if it wasn't the swirls of smoke enveloping our frozen bodies, then it was our own breath that would remind us, without a doubt, and make us aware that we were alive, and even if in those days we had no choice because of the war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, then we could at least consume that strange book, passing it from one hand to another, saving it from the heat of the fire, just like one hundred years ago when its Irish author defended his book by accepting society's sentence and leaving, like an exile who leaves without return, without looking back. *You're digressing again, she says. Write about Arax so that I, who doesn't remember, remembers and imagines again her carefree, half-ironic stance when she'd show up late to her exhibitions, when everyone was already there, students, dissident abstractionists, pop artists, and minimalists assembled in groups, waiting for her to appear, arm in arm with her next (new) ad-*



*mirer, as if her hand had found a new fan, and how she fanned the fire, igniting the entire hall (former admirers) with her presence.* In the 1990s, books burned with another kind of skill, burned with another kind of desolate silence, a silence that was unfamiliar to us, and some expected to see the same reddish tongues, to breathe in the same smoke that rose from the printed pages, feel that same fanatical warmth that spread in 1966 from Mahari's Burning Orchards. But books never burn in the same way, so what makes this repetition any different?

\* \* \*

—\_\_\_\_\_ was right, the novel is themeless. The peculiarity of the book is that it was courageous enough to narrate everything in the first person, in all sincerity.

—But is it worth repeating \_\_\_\_\_'s opinion? And, to boot, which \_\_\_\_\_'s opinion . . .

—But according to \_\_\_\_\_, true artists are first and foremost moral figures, and they're also important for keeping society healthy. Yes, they're the true moral guardians of society, through their work, whether they realize it or not . . . I'm not a literary critic, but I'm speaking as someone who loves reading literature. . . .

\* \* \*

*No, says Shmavon, that's not right. It wasn't like that. Arax didn't show up like that, carefree. Because—*



Wait. Wait. Wait.

*And she didn't have any admirers, and she wouldn't come to exhibitions either, okay, maybe she came sometimes, but she was always alone and always—*

Wait.

*—drunk on wine, appearing suddenly from out of the crowd. She always wore the same thing: the open-neck denim dress. And I remember one time she*

*brought (xeroxed copies of) one of Mayakovsky's letters to Lili Brik and handed them out to passersby in the gallery.*

