

KARAPENTS, 85...

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Tatul Sonentz-Papazian, Watertown MA, 24 November 2010



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Who was Hakob Karapents? This outwardly cheerful, exuberant exile destined to become one of the brighter lights of contemporary Armenian literature. In one of his short stories entitled "Bittersweet" he presents us with this brief yet enlightening genesis:

"My grandfather's name was Hacob. His grandfather's name was Karapet. Karapet had a son called Simon. Simon had come from Gandzak, settled in Meghri. No one knows how my grandfather had reached Tabriz. Many things had happened in Tabriz until I was born.... That year there was no scarcity of fish.... and there was no famine.... But that's not it; the point is that I never knew my father's dreams and now that he's gone, I'll never fathom the distant mists covering his countenance, the rhythm of his steps..., his self..., the hidden shudders of his loves, he who held the key to the universe when I was a child, lively and barefoot in Yaghchali Darband, in that God forsaken corner of the world which... led to the pebbly streets of Lilava and from there to the luminous roads of the world; he and I, my father, whose dreams I never knew."

This misty gap in the annals of his early memories would haunt Karapents the man, as he walked many of the luminous roads of the world -- and the writer -- coloring his perception of his own

identity in muted yet bittersweet shades of a nostalgic sadness to his dying day, permeating and surfacing in many of his works.

It is hard to speak of Karapents, the man, and of death in the same breath. He was all life, a bright, jovial presence. Karapents, the writer, was a vast realm of creativity, whose boundaries were meant to expand towards new horizons like wide open windows with distinctive panoramas on the unfolding drama of human existence in exile. In his own words:

"In the inner window of each writer, gleams the dawn of his life. I try to reach that morning of my childhood not in yearning or nostalgia, but in search of a source of fresh and unspoiled instincts, where first impressions are immediate, brutally candid and indelible. When I am able to... relocate a ray of sunshine through the thick curtains of time, I hang on to it for dear life. That day, my writing satisfies me... it seems to me, that what I will say tomorrow will be more important."

Alas, when the chain of this outstanding writer's days was suddenly and cruelly broken -- his creativity still on an upswing -- we were deprived of what he was to tell us tomorrow. The most accessible star of the fading constellation of genuine diasporan writers went out -- a narrator, always accessible to the reader in the immediacy of his empathy and insight with the engaging measure of his distinctive language and style, devoid, it seems, of any artifice...

✘ So, who was Karapents -- born Hacob Karapetian -- Hacobik (little Jack) to his Iranian-Armenian intimates? The compelling image of a shivering child comes to mind, in search of the warmth of a home, in the cold, windy streets of Lilava. Then the man, still bearing the burden -- and the gift -- of wounded childhood, having crossed the bumpy roads covering almost seventy years of diasporan existence -- head and shoulders above many of his peers, with ten outstanding volumes of authentic literature to his name -- today, standing tall in the 20th century annals of Armenian literature, as the foremost chronicler of a thriving corner of the Diaspora. In a 1986 essay, entitled "The Writer and his road", Karapents introduces himself:

"I am a creature of the dispersion, a Diasporan-Armenian, more than Persian- or American-Armenian. I know no other world than that of the Diaspora, regardless of all its inconsistencies, I feel at home on its roads, sometimes even feeling like a citizen of the world. Is this good or bad, I don't know. I only know that we serve as a bridge between the generation of the Desert and today's Diaspora -- an enormous task that reality has set on our shoulders."

Karapents, time and again, expresses the daunting awareness and fear of failure in that 'enormous task' that destiny sets on the exile's shoulders, and in "Bittersweet" he expresses it's universality in these self-negating lines acknowledging the fast fading reality of one's remote roots:

"There is only the exile. There is my exile... the exile of man... There is the political exile... the exile of being a man. The inner exile of man. The mass of the exiled in an exiled world. I know I've fallen into self-

delusion, but I have no other course and I am no longer me, I'm no longer that which I was, maybe I am that which I wasn't, maybe I never was; if I were me, I wouldn't look for the answer in external appearances, I, who no longer recognize me, never have and never will"

In spite of such outpourings of anguished self-search, one can't fail to recognize, that Karapents, the writer, has wide and sturdy shoulders, solid and firm as the foundations of his native talents. Thus endowed, he – through his works -- opens new windows on the landscape of modern day predicaments, windows that frame the individual experience alongside the particular shades of light and darkness fluctuating in the ambiance of a certain time and place, both alien and familiar – the Armenian, tethered to the distant past through the mists of a history that mocks logic, and the Diasporan that flounders in the boggling fog of an alien planet; two faces of the same coin, back to back, stuck with the awareness of each other's immediate presence, not so much unwilling, as unable to look each other in the eye.

Karapents is one of the few who tackles the daunting task of shedding light on both facets with a diasporan spotlight, making a strong statement for the inescapable presence of a disturbing reality as it exists. A reality prickly with thorns, since the Armenian-Diasporan cohabitation runs against the grain of what is traditionally deemed natural in the accepted order of ethnicity, scratching and lacerating the threatened traditions of a sanctified homeland culture. Karapents, however stands his ground, stating:

"Convinced, that the dynamics are there, so is the echo of the given instance, at the zenith of that existence, in that moment of history. I love the incongruous synthesis of flower and thistle."

As all true artists, Karapents is the singer of the medley of pleasure and pain, joy and suffering -- a medley that echoes both the mellow and the raucous sounds of our exiled existence throughout the pages of his published works.

One had to get close to Karapents the man, as friend and colleague, to grasp the youthful exuberance of his manner. The particular energy of his style was enhanced by his preference to stay with the raw immediacy of first impressions; he resisted the temptation of polishing the gems that made their presence and value felt without fastidious attempts at perfection. "If I were to strive for perfection," he tells us in one of his essays,

"I would have edited the material several times, I would have smoothed down the inner and outer surfaces of the words and I would have sprinkled them with ruby, emerald and stardust. Instead, I have kept the original freshness of the ideas, the immediate coarseness of the words and the raw intimacy of impressions."

Anyone who has established an intimacy with Karapents's spontaneous, unadorned style will see that the brilliance of his most memorable lines emanates directly from the authentic rendering of his experiences, not from the dazzling sparkle of 'ruby and stardust'. The insurgent spirit deep in his Armenian soul – often, seemingly, quiet but never truly dormant -- would not have allowed him to express himself otherwise; the rebellious fiber in his makeup resisted the temptations born of success and adulation.

In a piece entitled "The Writer as the Voice of Protest", Karapents picks up his pen to join in the eternal battle between true and false, freedom and servitude, light and darkness: "*It is obvious,*" he says:

"that my struggle is against the establishment. That the writer's battle is against petrified concepts and rusty traditions."

Nevertheless, his generous and gentle nature does not allow the clear-eyed critic in him to ride roughshod over the works of lesser writers. His verbal or written analyses and evaluations – reserved to colleagues and peers -- were always expressed in an tolerant tone, that more often than not, hit the mark without destroying, laying bare the subjects failings without causing crippling wounds.

First and foremost, Karapents has a profound reverence towards the creative process, a reverence that leads him to embrace all those who serve – or try to serve – in the realm of creative endeavor in all its manifestations -- as long as they stayed true, resisting the siren song of easy access to success through glittery displays of 'rubies, emeralds and stardust', as he puts it.

Here is what he says in the essay he aptly calls "Bittersweet":

"Nineteenth century romantics were ensnared in the painful throes of universal duality, always striving for a more enlightened world where majestic reality reigned -- the all engulfing conflagration, forgetting the holes in their shoes and the muddy roads, when the body is weak and the soul supreme. I say one must descend naked to the bottom of the mud, feel the dark flow of tainted currents and with a cleansed soul look into the pupils of the beast, continuously and relentlessly, so that there is no deceit and illusion; when this is what there is, the entire chain of furtive moments, which when squeezed turn into life, a bit of memory, a taste of love and endless suffering -- the panorama of absurd, daily surveys."

Throughout his long career as a journalist, editor, critic, essayist and novelist, Karapents resists commercialism and self-promotion. His work, in its spontaneity and candor, stresses the idea that a writer must preserve the genuine curiosity of youth and protect the integrity of the truth as he looks for it in his quest for wisdom. An endless quest, trying to create a language that will bring opposing sides of a coin into a dialogue of recognition, acceptance and coexistence -- all this in the ever evolving panorama of a diaspora, by and large oblivious of the Armenian writer's plight, a dispersion

that keeps developing and vanishing at the same time, and a homeland both imagined and real.

The Armenian writer of the Diaspora – writing in either eastern or western versions of a mother tongue split further with the intrusion of an alienating orthography meant to deepen the cultural chasm between homeland and dispersion. A writer often tempted to write in the language of the host country -- is slowly, but surely becoming a vanishing breed. *"Many are the ones who advise me to write in English,"* says Karapents in his essay, *"But,"* he adds:

"to be part of American literature one has to be American. I am Armenian, a Diasporan, which is a unique creature in the history of the world. I've changed several countries. I've lived in a few dozen cities, undergoing many cultural influences. Spiritually I'm tied to Armenia, but New York is my home. Although I've lived in America for many years, I'm not an American. I'm not a super-pure Armenian, either, so to speak. However, my 'Armenianness' is my originality, my certificate to walk among the crowds while feeling different. So, New York is my world. I don't feel foreign in New York, because New York is the city of foreigners. Each one has arrived from a different place. I'm more the result of my immediate environment than of America. It would have been different if I had been born in America, or had spent my early, formative years in America. Then, the message of 'E Pluribus Unum' would have applied. That is why, in America they take me for a European, in Europe, for an American. While in Armenia, God knows what! In other words, I've never depended on American history or culture. I've also not depended totally on Armenian history and culture. Perhaps, I and those who are like me represent the new Diasporan type that confounds everybody. Now, New York is the extension of my family. Where this leads, I don't know. All I know is, I don't feel fully American and I can't be part of American literature."

If we were to accept this argument – essentially born of the fear of total and final alienation from the memory of a father who was to tell him something, but never did – we have to purge authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Leon Surmelian, Shalom Alacheim and the entire American Yiddish literature from the roster of American authors, whose work, nevertheless constitutes an important and inseparable part of American literature.

In spite of these denials, Karapents's affection and knowledge – almost in the biblical sense -- of America is quite palpable; it permeates many of his works, when he speaks of New York, Boston, or San Francisco for example, as in this passage from "Bittersweet":

"The hills form the San Francisco Bay amphitheater. As to what is the real San Francisco? That's another story which, to be able to write, one must turn to ashes and be reborn, squeeze the scattered moments to a degree where they turn to emeralds and decorate the ravishing décolletage of the Bay. In that city, during the summers of my student years, I waited on tables and wrote my first novel, whose heroine emerged one day from the agitated foam of the Pacific and said to me, "I am Almira, for whom you were waiting." Now, every single stone of that city has turned into a word and is hounding me. Stone and word

have become story and are chasing me. Now I don't know which is real and which is unreal. That is a story that in order to write one has to go back to the beginning, when there was faith in the word, blood in stone, and salvation in art."

Karapents is very much a man of place and time, a man of the New World and of our times, writing of and for our times of exile. While depicting the present as a native Diasporan, his roots -- in spite of his romance with the New World and his articulated doubts of self-recognition -- are firmly inbedded in the moral and cultural soil of the homeland. Thus, the Armenian humanist stands tall in the following lines taken from the introduction of "Two Worlds":

"In the final analysis... a work of art reflects its own times – written in haste, sometimes in anger, sometimes in pain, at times with love and appreciation, but always with the firm conviction that the search for the truth is more important than the laurel of victory, and that a drop of mercy is worth a whole library. Because that is the very purpose of the accumulated harvest of all cultural endeavor."

Majestic in its simplicity, this paragraph reflects the credo of his people -- of the one 'who held the key to the universe when he was a child', his own estranged father, who was to tell him something, and never did -- at this moment of enlightenment, the writer's own persona comes to light, radiating universal human values, transcending the boundaries of the ephemeral and reaching the very gates of the Creator of his forebears.

In a 1988 piece, written in a sweeping mood, entitled "Sacrificial Altar", he concludes with the following words:

"If man is to deal with the gods, he should be ready to pay the price, otherwise swimming in warm and safe waters is neither brave nor is it a sign of virtue, even though society may erect a monument in one's honor in the main square of the city... In other words, one must dismantle something in order to build the new, as the thing to be dismantled was already destroyed before its demise. It was always in ruins. There was no one who could see. In fact, people don't wish to see the inner ruins behind the facade.

"I am looking for an honest man," concludes Karapents, "a man who can fight with God, who can doubt, love, and sit at his table."

Obviously, the man he was looking for was no other than himself, and after a life-long quarrel with the inequities in God's creation, Karapents, the restless 'exile' has earned a well deserved seat at the table of the stellar lineup of Armenian writers.

