

Yeghishe Charents' selected poetry and prose

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(We would like to extend our thanks to Eddie Arnavoudian for his invaluable assistance with the translations.)

The following selection of poetry and prose comes from the pen of Soviet Armenian poet, novelist, essayist, translator and revolutionist Yeghishe Charents (1897-1937). The WSWs is posting today an appreciation of his life and work.

I conjure up the distant past where flesh
that makes my proud body and my mind,
mystery and matter, both will be burnt sacrifice
to the measure of the sun.

Sister, woman, let there be no you
nor me there but an immaterial pair—
then you, transformed, miracle again
in the crucible called sun,

and when I call you into my embrace
you will respond, flushed by fire, passion,
clasping my arms, made young and pure again.
Phantom, woman, sister, Semiramis, god.

...

Suddenly on the road, a body.
We stopped and looked at each other.
It was already rotting. The rain
had taken away every memory
of its life and race from its form.

We hesitate a long time, until
a soldier pushed it away laughing
like a lunatic. I began to think
this too once bore weapons.
once loved. We too are going.
We too are going to become such as he
a corpse, a clod.

...

Then when a soldier friend
called me in a trembling voice
I caught up with him, and stopped short.
A woman had fallen in the snow ahead
and was dying, wordlessly, tearlessly,
a senseless grin on her face
and still clenching in dry fingers
her priceless treasure, a piece of bread.

She blinked for the last time,
smiled satisfied and died with that smile
before a terrified, speechless
troupe of men whose hearts closed in
on a nameless pain.

Silently we dug into the ice
to bury her without a hallelujah.
Our trembling, cracked, frozen hands
arranged the same snow on her
and like dead men burying
their consciences, we walked on.

Whom my sudden death had made deaf and blind;

Who believed in vain they had a peaceful life
And began to dream of freedom from strife
For themselves, as well as for human kind.

How could they have thought they could kill the hero!
I am immortal, cold-hearted and crude;
I will sleep again to wake up renewed—
I have countless names: Death, Destruction, Nero!

Incandescent
lamplit girl
glowing, madonna-eyed,
slender, fragile
fever-bright
fever-dream
personified;
blue-eyed agate,
milkskin pearl,
lucent lamplight,
called a girl.

To all friends, distant and near—to all the worlds and suns—
To all the flame-like souls.—
To all those, whose soul burns bright—
To all their sunlit souls—
In this savage twilight of life and death,
To the blazing souls—Salute! Salute!

...

Beneath the setting sun, beneath the evening flame
The frenzied masses fought in the ancient field.
They had come again, buoyant and fiery,
From cities and villages, distant and near steppes.
Those who had left their city, they had left behind the old mist
That had veiled life with a hazy cloud.
Those who had come from the village, they had left the humid soil
On which obedient life bore not a single golden spike.
Those who had arrived from the steppe, they had left behind vast
Span of the horizon that had become a prison.
Those who came from far cities shrouded in hazy mist,
They brought their tubercular hearts as a red flag.
Those who left the infinite darkness of their villages,
They brought with them the fecund power of the soil.
Those who came from the steppes, where they lived as prisoners,
They brought the span of the steppes in their pale blue eyes.
Rebellious, frenzied, sick of the old life,
They came to fight in that boundless field.

Of Vahan Derian, Charents writes, the “last poet of our old, pre-October literature, who had one foot in the old while reaching for the new with the other, He wanted to cross the boundary, but did not, remaining imprisoned in the abyss, like ‘Jesus nailed to his cross.’”

Of Hovhanness Toumanian, another major literary figure, he observes, “He was a wizard, busy resurrecting the past in the age of steam and electricity. In a terrifying time of world wars and revolutionary eruptions, this Loretsi Hovhaness[8] was a wondrous revelation, a genius, impossible and unbelievable.”

1919
 The Red Army.
 Black waters are flooding
 the boundaries of the fields and
 wings of light are fluttering overhead
 The Station
 Forces.
 Companies.
 Red Soldiers.
 Night.
 On the red forces
 a deep
 blackness pouring down.
 ...
 I now live in Moscow.
 In my head, golden storms.
 In my head, a Robert Owen
 stands vigil
 while I write
 and dream of what is to come.
 I love you Nayiri
 and my incendiary Iran.
 And am I far away from you?
 No. I am nearer. As the tensed arrow
 pulled back
 from the gazelle running before it.
 My soul had three arrows
 held taught against the bow of days,

 and all three have flown now
 to light joyous fires.
 I have not forgotten;
 they have all become one now.
 Now all of us, like a three pronged arrow,
 will fly to Indochina and Peking.
 Accept, take me now,
 Moscow of the red igniting fires,
 my golden Iran
 and my distant, distant Nayiri.
 Here the Communards Wall
 Here it is, jutting out.
 A small pockmarked facade
 A yellowed ruin.
 It's the remnant of another wall,
 A small part of it.
 It remains exactly
 As it was then.
 Across it
 A splattering of bullet holes.
 And
 On the stones of this very wall
 With a mallet fired by revenge
 A sculptor
 Has etched horrified faces.
 He then etched a woman
 Her waist pressed against stone,
 Her face of infinite wrath.
 Open breasted
 Fiercely extending her arms,
 She passionately confronts her enemies.
 She roars:
 La Commune est mort!

Vive la Commune!
 She is the
 Spirit of the Commune
 She stands firm,
 Unforgiving.
 And around her are etched faces of
 Men and women.
 They are
 The Paris
 Communards.
 A boundless wave of rage
 Rises within my heart.
 I want to name them all.
 But they are numberless
 All were mowed down with bayonets
 On orders from Galiffet of Versailles.
 Thiers stood upon
 A pedestal
 Of the corpses he made.
 They were brought here in groups
 And pressed against the wall.
 Bullets whistled
 Hitting
 Eyes
 Temples
 Foreheads.
 Bullets gashed holes in their bodies
 Passed through their flesh
 And dug into the wall.
 Bullets whistled ceaselessly, ceaselessly.
 In front of this same wall
 Another wall was formed from corpses.
 ...
 Paris
 Fear and mist
 Me.
 A poet.
 A Leninist Bolshevik
 Leaning against the wall.
 Listening to their voices,
 Their whispers.
 I understand you comrades,
 You are close to me.
 Blood brothers and sisters.
 Were someone to pass by
 They'd find it difficult to
 Distinguish my face from yours.
 Were the enemy to arrive
 He would think my face
 As one of yours.
 Fixed by a bullet onto this wall.
 I too am of your flesh comrades
 In me your ashes are resurrected.
 I look at your sculpted faces
 And I know each one of you.
 ...
 But know this comrades,
 Know this.
 We too have had many
 Pere Lachaise Walls
 From the day our
 Last comrade fell

At one of these walls
 Our struggle has been ceaseless, endless.
 How many Pere Lachaise walls have we suffered.
 But!
 We have one wall comrades,
 A wall that is something else, something else!
 That wall is in Moscow.
 In the north.
 It is far from here.
 But the road to Moscow is familiar to you.
 It is familiar to the struggling worker
 Whether in London or the Ruhr.
 That Wall is called
 The Kremlin Wall!
 There are comrades resting there
 Who would have rested with you.
 This is a red, a new
 Pere Lachaise.
 But another, another Pere Lachaise!
 A wall of victory, of triumph!
 With it we have arrived at glory
 We have divided the world in two.
 With it we are today proud.
 We built this wall's foundations
 After victory.
 For our fighting columns
 This is an arch of triumph.
 Through it runs our very core and foundation.
 Every stone here was laid with struggle.
 It is in triumph
 That founded
 Our Red Pantheon.
 For the ashes of the dead make the strongest cement
 The strongest and most enduring binding
 And it is with that that the land becomes land,
 The people, a people, the future a future.
 "That evening, my first in the House of Correction, I listened to that
 music for a long time; and the music convinced me that life had not yet
 ended, that it is in fact inexhaustible, that it carries within itself an endless
 variety of fragrances and possibilities. Thanks to Meno. And to that
 hospital orderly who revealed for me the secrets of the music and the
 applause that came from the second floor across the yard."
 Now they are saying that I am written out,
 that I have strayed from the right road,
 that our struggle has deserted my aim,
 that I have chosen another way.
 They rub cold lips together
 chewing cold words as if yellow
 spikes (of funeral flowers)
 were already laid out
 before an actual death.
 ...
 Lenin, yes, Lenin. But not the rally.
 Not the drum. Not the placard.
 Lenin today means summit,
 means inner construction of the new theme.
 That motif grows but unlike grass,
 grows of its own will. Springs like a dawn
 in an immense undulation of deep thought.
 You lived, you left, you are no more now,
 dear friend, my comrade, and heroic love.
 Life still blossoms, is no desert;

No star has dropped yet from above
 Flora and fauna flower before me
 just as they bloomed in your spring.
 With effort, endeavor, and multiplication
 life proceeds with its building.

...
 You and I shared an amazing age which rose
 like a huge shield lifted high
 to shine, held by many energetic arms
 like a dazzling emblazoned name
 of a giant (whose might kept all doors
 called regret ajar in our minds).
 When he[15] died, his cortege became
 for you and me a road to follow.
 That was not a friend we buried,
 it was a roaring dawn that rose
 over this planet. And although slow

to wake, we rose to meet its light.
 Its form was the future taking shape
 like a flag of victory. It glows.

For you now, are all the questions resolved?
 Even the "problems of love"?
 You seem to have prepared all solutions.
 And there is no challenge you cannot meet
 Calmly while for me (And how can I not admit
 my short-comings?) the world is too complicated
 to explain away with only ardent admiration.

...
 I know that man can win
 in the blustering battle but then lose,
 succumb, done in by love or worry, a
 churning which the brain accepts, an endless
 baking in a sleepless furnace of torture.
 The route I have chosen is pitted, tiring,
 and I have suffered sobering losses but I can rise
 above the tortures that have injured my spirit, tortures
 that leave both sleep and weariness behind
 eventually.

The Director (*Translators note: The Director is the loyal follower and
 therefore legitimate successor to the Great Author.*)

"It is evident to you, the audience,
 that (the Great Author) left us only
 the draft of this last work.
 And word for word it is possible to say
 that in editing the rougher segments
 we have attempted to knit the whole
 so that the essence remains unchanged.
 In our edited text not a single line
 Belongs in its entirety to our pen alone." [18]

The Director (*Translators note: The Director is here seeking to appear
 as a supporter of collective leadership*)

"Whoever knows our author or has
 followed him and deeply studied his
 monumental works
 would of course laugh at that gentleman.
 Whoever is familiar with the spirit of
 our author's work knows that
 he does not have a central character." [19]

The Director (*Translators note: He is pretending to be an advocate of
 the interest of the masses as against the Hero's individualism.*)

"...only the uneducated can today

demand that in our genius author's work
that sings of the drama of the masses,
the entire plot would revolve around
a central person, a hero.”[20]

The Elderly Member of the Audience (*Translators note: The character is a critic charging the director with censorship, destruction of or concealing of the Great Author's manuscripts.*)

“But! Honourable members of the audience
in the third act that we have seen and
I stress this despite your grand acclaim

...

We did not see either the genius of our dead author
or the picture of our great struggle.”[21]

“I have seen our great masters’
own authentic handwritten manuscript.
I declare that in that writing
The great Hero is there. A central role
is allocated to him.”[22]

The Hero (*Translators note: The Hero criticises Act 3, stoutly affirms his right to a central, even dominant role.*)

“I ask you once again!
What did you see on the stage today?
A dense crowd of faceless humanity that
blind and senseless like a cattle herd cattle is
led by useless dwarfs
not knowing how or where.”[23]

“Could the great author have chosen such a noble
and world-shattering subject
without once in his drama offering
one eye catching person or hero
who with his genius, knowledge and mind
would at least rise a little above
that packed crowd of faceless cattle.”[24]

“Oh how, how don't you understand
that the Director has hurled me out
of this heroic tragedy
and has given my grand and selfless role
to talentless actors.”[25]

“Yes, yes, I exist
but a hand has deleted me from the drama
and so a heroic work
is reduced to a farce, senseless and vain.”[26]

Listen, western world
for a thousand years
you have been giving birth
to genius after genius.
Now you have become a circus
for monstrosities.
We glance into your terrible fires
and see a dawn that has no horizon,
no bounds.

There's so much spite in my heart, so much bitterness—
I have only seen sorrow, poison and mess.

Have I really been guilty, or is it our life
Has been viciously ruthless—just a long slow knife?

I do not have real friends, I do not have foes;
The foe he always lingers—the friend he just goes.

Could you have conceived that the question of “essence and form”
Was a question of land and bread, resolved in an irreconcilable struggle?

The century hands us a bill, but the burden of paying that debt
Is borne by future generations—and many are proclaimed bankrupt.

I was born in Kars but the sun

of Iran lights my soul
with an old inextinguishable
homesickness. And the whole world
becomes for my spirit, a fatherland.

As a noble man, a noble friend,
Your radiant curly-haired Dauphin's profile—
In my earthly life I shall never forget,
O Aghasi, as long as I live.

And like a legend, unreal, or
A tale in the people's soul,
Your catastrophe shall live, as a secret,
Or a stolen, a **forged**[32] Nayirian myth.

Wise is only the one who builds crossroads—
The happy man of tomorrow
Who will come, I know, and along with your ashes
Restore the entombed legend of our victory.

As long as they rule, let the new ministers of today
Cudgel his corpse on Semiramis's bed—
He will rise again, toughened by his defeat.

They were beheading us with each breath—
—In the name of gold, blood, faith, and guile;
In the name of our will scheming and vile;
In the name of fear that lasts until death.

They were beheading us with each breath—
—In the name of the foe and consistence;
—The minaret against the pulpit; the existence,
—For all they saw in us was dust and death.

There was such savage talent in you,
Such unquenchable, unbending will.
You wanted to eulogize the new buildings and stables,
Stifling the flute of love-fantasy inside of you.
A heart, that was once placed in you
By that higher master of life—Fate—
Or it was impossible, impossible to confine a fragment of it
In a box of matches as “something dead”.
It had more science and meaning in that bit of possibility
Than all the steel pyramids. machines, and
The Eiffel tower of wonders
That you had sung in your poetry.

...

I'm betrayed and defrauded, my heart;
Your light is their poison and gall;
Like whores they knock on your door,
Marring, and making you small.

Their desire is to spit in your face,
Their odes are so deadly complete.
Black gallows is the name of your place
Where they want you to chant your defeat

Ah, down with all those creations
You once held as sacred and bright—
Disregard any hope of salvation,
Be the first one to turn out the light.

[1] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 29.

[2] *Ibid.*, 64-80.

[3] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 29-32

[4] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis

Publishers), 33.

[5] The choice of the English-language “frenzied” for the Armenian word is not entirely precise. In English, “frenzied” bears something of a negative connotation, implying that people have become a bit crazed. In Armenian, the word can have that implication, but it can also mean “incensed,” “enraged,” “driven onward by anger.” According to British-Armenian scholar Eddie Arnavoudian, the poet intended the word to bear this second meaning. A recently released selection of Charents’ writing uses this title.

[6] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 39–55.

[7] Yeghishe Charents, “On the Boundary of Two Worlds,” in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents*, trans. Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian (New York: Ashod Press, 1985), 220.

[8] Hovhanness Toumanian

[9] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 99-114.

[10] Original Translation by Eddie Arnavoudian of Yeghishe Charents, “The Communards Wall in Paris” in *Collected Works of Yeghishe Charents in 6 Volumes*, Volume 2, 1963, 232-249.

[11] Original Translation by Eddie Arnavoudian from Yeghishe Charents, “Ode to ‘the builders of cities’”, *Collected Works in 6 Volumes*, Volume 4, 1968, 389.

[12] Yeghishe Charents. ‘Ereva’s House of Corrections,’ in *Across Two Worlds: Selected Prose of Eghishe Charents*, translated by Jack Antreassian and Marzbed Margossian (Ashod Press, 1985), 2-28.

[13] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 185-89.[14] *Ibid.*, 198-99.

[15] The translators explain that “the giant referred to is Lenin.”

[16] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 195-197

[17] Original Translation by Eddie Arnavoudian from Yeghishe Charents, “Achilles or Piero,” *Collected Works in 6 Volumes*, Volume 4, 1968, 318-364.

[18] *Ibid.*, 320.

[19] *Ibid.*, 325.

[20] *Ibid.*, 357.

[21] *Ibid.*, 330.

[22] *Ibid.*, 331.

[23] *Ibid.*, 351.

[24] *Ibid.*, 354.

[25] *Ibid.*, 353.

[26] *Ibid.*, 355.

[27] Eghishe Charents *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers), 202.

[28] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 177.

[29] *Ibid.*, 178-189.

[30] Eghishe Charents, ‘The Monument,’ in *Land of Fire: Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Diana Der Hovanessian and Marzbed Margossian (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishers, 1985), 218.

[31] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 211.

[32] Emphasis in the original

[33] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel

Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 247.

[34] Yeghishe Charents, *Yeghishe Charents: 40 Poems*, ed. Samvel Mkrtchyan (Yerevan, Armenia: Yeghishe Charents Memorial Museum, 2012), 259.

[35] *Ibid.*, 261.



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