



# The post-memory of the Armenian genocide and the myth of origins in Antonia Arslan's works

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## Abstract

This contribution aims to analyse the postmemory of the origins through the work of an Italian author of Armenian descent, Antonia Arslan, and stems from an ongoing research project about “Narrating the Trauma in European Literatures and Cultures” based at La Sapienza University of Rome. I will therefore focus on the link between this research project, which serves as a theoretical framework, and the specific case study concerning Antonia Arslan. The project originates from two concerns: the first one being the awareness of the loss of poets and writers’ long-lived faith in the creative power of the artistic gesture, a widespread belief before the two world wars, and the second one consisting in a reflection on a general change of the theoretic framework of literature, especially in the case of the narration of traumatic experiences such as wars, genocides, migrations and displacements of people, which have taken place in Europe during the 20th Century [*Neohelicon*, 2004(1), *Migratio et litterae*].

**Keywords** Trauma · Armenian genocide · Italian postmemory literature · Imagined history · Postmemory

## Introduction

The trans-disciplinary dimension, in addition to the transnational dimension, is a determining factor that has caused a re-positioning of the specificity of literature within a wider cultural space, with which it interacts. For example, interesting intersections occurred on the borderline between narrative theory and the “trauma studies” (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001; Violi, 2014), exploring the use of narration and rhetorical techniques to rework the cultural memory of catastrophic collective events, as well as the passage from a lived memory to a memory of the trauma itself “told” by second and third generations; or between narrative theory and (individual and collective) memory studies in second and third generations in

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the context of uprooting experiences (exiles, diasporas, migrations, wars) culminated in the late or “liquid” modernity as defined by Zygmunt Bauman:

Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects—but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To ‘be modern’ means to modernize—compulsively, obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’, let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying underdefined. Each new structure which replaces the previous one as soon as it is declared old-fashioned and past its use-by date is only another momentary settlement—acknowledged as temporary and ‘until further notice’. Being always, at any stage and at all times, ‘post-something’ is also an undetachable feature of modernity. As time flows on, ‘modernity’ changes its forms in the manner of the legendary Proteus [...]. What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) ‘post-modernity’ and what I’ve chosen to call, more to the point, ‘liquid modernity’, is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago ‘to be modern’ meant to chase ‘the final state of perfection’—now it means an infinity of improvement, with no ‘final state’ in sight and no desired. (Bauman, 2000, p. 82)

This contribution aims to analyse the postmemory of the origins through the work of an Italian author of Armenian descent, Antonia Arslan, and stems from an ongoing research project about “Narrating the Trauma in European Literatures and Cultures” led by me and based at Sapienza University of Rome. I will therefore focus on the link between this research project, which serves as a theoretical framework, and the specific case study concerning Antonia Arslan. The project originates from two concerns: the first one being the awareness of the loss of poets and writers’ long-lived faith in the creative power of the artistic gesture, a widespread belief before the two world wars, and the second one consisting in a reflection on a general change of the theoretic framework of literature, especially in the case of the narration of traumatic experiences such as wars, genocides, migrations and displacements of people, which have taken place during the 20th Century.

Such a corpus includes a set of Italian and European literary writings from the second half of the 20th Century, concerning the narrated “memory” and “post-memory” of traumatic collective experiences that have impacted the individual stories of authors. This will enable us to reflect on the dichotomy between the long-lived faith in the creative power of the pre-20th century literary word and artistic gesture and its irreparable loss in the terminal tragedies of WWI and the Armenian genocide and WWII and the Shoah, both related examples of the most radical denial of humanism, with significant aesthetic and literary consequences. The creative act, once seen as the metaphor of divine light inherent in humans, turned—according to quite a few writers and artists—into the impossibility of the creative word or gesture or into a negative practice of a hopeless search for a purification or a reinvention of language itself.

The guiding lights of this research are the texts of some contemporary writers who work in the dimension of the “imagined history” (as Elrud Ibsch named it) and the “postmemory” (a category coined by Marianne Hirsch), that is, after the generation of silence (Adorno, 1955).<sup>1</sup>

According to Elrud Ibsch, and with regard to the Holocaust:

Another stage of writing [...] is what I call the ‘imagined history’. To date, numerous historical studies about the Holocaust have appeared and a large amount of documentary information has been recorded. Notwithstanding the subjective perspective of any historical report, such information must be submitted to truth claims and be tested. Literature, including ‘imagined history’ is allowed to follow a different convention. A distinguishing feature of literary writing and reading is the need to negotiate fictionality [...] In many cases literature contradicts official historiography instead of echoing it. (Ibsch, 2007, p. 3)

“Imagined history” obeys different genre conventions. Following Ibsch’s categorization, these narrations are “deliberately anti-realistic and playfully carnivalesque in the sense of Michael Bachtin, who interprets the carnival as a subversive reaction to an illegitimate display of power” (Ibsch, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, grotesque and irony, or a mixture of tragedy and comedy, are postmodernist procedures of “imagined history” by which many authors from the 1980s to today have re-written the history of the Holocaust and other tragedies of the 20th century.

According to Hirsch:

postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are emptied by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22)

To better explain the term itself and to respond to objections to her arguments Hirsch later stated that:

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<sup>1</sup> “Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben” (Adorno, 1955, p. 30). Engl. transl.: “The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (Adorno, 1967, p. 34).

The post in postmemory signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath. It is not a concession simply to linear temporality or sequential logic. Think of the many different posts that continue to dominate our intellectual landscape. Postmodernism and poststructuralism, for example, inscribe both a critical distance and a profound interrelation with modernism and structuralism; postcolonial does not mean the end of the colonial but its troubling continuity, though, in contrast, postfeminist has been used to mark a sequel to feminism. We certainly are, still, in the era of posts, which—for better or worse—continue to proliferate posttraumatic, of course, but also postsecular, posthuman, postcolony, postracial. [...] Like the other ‘posts’, postmemory reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture. (Hirsh, 2012, p. 5)

The scarcity of studies about Italian language authors asks for a particular attention to this specific context (Baldini, 2012), which must however be comparatively related to the international dimension, due to the specific nature of this literary genre, open and exposed as it is to the world-wide networks of postmemory culture (Speelman et al., 2007; D’Alessandro, 2023). This is the reason why it is necessary to broaden the research to other national contexts, languages and literatures, hence the comparative approach of this research project.

Another relevant point is the diachronic dimension of this research project, covering the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the whole twentieth century, due to the need to measure the persistence and transformation of literature derived from experiences of migration, expatriation, war or exile, and its contribution to the definition of modernity.

A distinctive feature of this research project consists first and foremost in its position within an international panorama of studies on literary texts published by first- and second-generation male/female authors vis-à-vis the tragic events that have marked 20th century European history (wars, exiles, migrations, genocides). Attention will be paid to the comparison of the post-memory literature in Italy to the European context, referring to its specificity vis-à-vis works written by the generation which directly experienced such catastrophic collective events in its adulthood. The Italian second generation (the “postmemory” generation) has not been studied in depth, with the exception of those researches carried out in an ambit strictly focused on Italian contemporary literature written by Jewish authors.<sup>2</sup> The comparison to similar cases in other European countries is essential for an understanding of the phenomenon itself on both a literary and a historical-cultural level. In fact, one of the ultimate aims of the project consists of tracing an overview of the narrative authors and texts to be analysed, to deepen the constitutive elements on both the

<sup>2</sup> See the essays in the volume already cited and edited by Speelman, Jansen, Gaiga. See also the PhD thesis by Barbara D’Alessandro, *La letteratura della postmemoria in Italia: 1978-2019*, discussed in 2020 at Sapienza University of Rome, which reconstructs and proposes a comprehensive corpus of Italian postmemory works on the Shoah. Instead, on the Italian memory of the Shoah see the article by Anna Baldini.

formal and the contextual level, so that they can be systematized in the context of European literature.

This project may bring about an advancement of knowledge with respect to the state of the art, inasmuch as it can widen the scope of trauma studies in Italy from “remembered history” to “imagined history” (Ibsch, 2007, p. 3) with regard to the historical facts that are narrated, or better re-narrated following the oral narratives of previous generations rather than direct memory, also making extensive use of historical source research.

It should not be forgotten that this research field has had a remarkable development abroad, starting from the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, one of the earliest scholars who considered memory as the intersection of collective elements rooted in social institutions and practices rather than the experience of the single individual (hence the title of his 1950 essay *La mémoire collective*). Halbwachs maintains that the individual act of memory is only possible based on “cadres sociaux,” and this has induced memory studies to focus not only on inner memory (as it happened in the psychological and cognitive ambit) but rather on the outer memory, that is, a memory codified in practices or objects, including the artistic and literary ones. One cannot help acknowledging that these studies have started a fruitful critical debate that has e.g. led to the researches of Aleida Assmann on collective memory mediators and writing in particular, also analysed in their relationship with images (Assmann, 1999, 2012). The fundamental connection between literature and the visual arts (beginning with family pictures) has been studied by the above mentioned Marianne Hirsch, of Romanian descent, who entered the field of “memory studies” by intersecting the subset of trauma studies (in particular those dealing with the Shoah) and that of gender studies, and coining—also with respect to her experience as the daughter of Shoah survivors—the term “postmemory” itself, first appeared in her 1992 article that was ultimately developed in her 2012 monograph *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*.

As we have already said, Postmemory can be defined as the narrative reworking of the memory of experiences deriving from a collective trauma, transmitted to those who have not lived them, who usually belong to the second or third generation; this term can be applied to the heirs of the victims of the Shoah or other genocides like the Armenian one (Altounian & Altounian, 2009), but could also be used for the descendants of those who suffered the trauma of territorial displacement (exiles and migrations), ethnic and/or political persecutions, and the loss of relatives due to the consequences of conflicts on a local or world-wide scale. A fundamental aspect of this research consists precisely in its being open to some meaningful samples of analogous cases present in the European ambit, to be addressed by members of the research team. The purpose is to circumscribe possible resemblances and differences on the plane of both narrative invention and authorial intention with respect to the historical facts they deal with.

In short, the inquiry object will be the identification and study of a corpus of literary writings, from the late 20th century to today, that is, during the last period of the late modernity or “liquid modernity” in Italy and Europe, concerning the gap between “memory” and “postmemory” of traumatic collective experiences. I mean by literature of memory the works written by surviving witnesses of traumatic

events, and by post-memory the works produced by generations following traumatic historical events. The transnational nature of this issue, which concerns historical facts and consequences on the cultural level that cross national borders (genocides are a prime example of this), asks—as already said—for an approach that is open to the comparison of the Italian case with those of other countries, but limited to Europe; it will be carried out through a sample, without presuming to be exhaustive.

In the frame of this research, I am devoting special attention to the Padua-based writer of Armenian descent Antonia Arslan, former university professor of Italian literature, who wrote several post-memorial novels, among which her trilogy dealing with the 1915 Armenian genocide: the first book, *Skylark Farm* (2006; *La masseria delle Allodole*, 2004), was translated into twenty languages and adapted for the cinema by the Taviani brothers in 2007 and was followed by two more: *La strada di Smirne* (2009) and *Il rumore delle perle di legno* (2015). The transmedia translation of this kind of novels is crucial here, because movies have amplified the possibility of reflecting on the tragedies of the twentieth century for generations that have not gone through them.<sup>3</sup> We must not forget that in this case the writer belongs to the third generation, a generation well within to the “postmemory” horizon (Hirsch, 2012).

Before 1915, Armenian territory extended from the Euphrates to the Caucasus highlands, a vast and fertile region where the millennial history of Armenian culture and its foundation myths resided. One of these myths tells that near Lake Van, now in Turkey, the legendary patriarch of the Armenian people Haik, who may have actually lived in the third millennium BC, defeated the titan Bel or, according to other sources, the tyrant Nimrod of Babylon, giving rise to Armenian civilisation. Armenian culture reached its peak in the 5th century AD, which historians refer to as the “Golden Century.” Turkish penetration, which began in the 16th century A.D., led to the assimilation of Armenians into the Ottoman Empire, resulting in discrimination against Christian populations (Armenians, Greeks and Syriacs) who were forced to pay a land tax. In the nineteenth century, Armenians constituted the majority of the Christian population in the territory of the Turkish-Islamic Empire, and they began to be not only discriminated against, but considered real internal enemies. The ideology of Pan-Turkism, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, no longer contemplated the coexistence of Christian and Muslim subjects, but rather supported the superiority of the Turkish ethnic group over all others present in the territory. In 1908, the initially revolutionary Young Turk movement was consolidated into a party (Committee of Union and Progress or Ittihad), which decided to participate in World War I by allying itself with the central European empires and organising a

<sup>3</sup> “One of these phenomena is the Italian-Armenian novelist Antonia Arslan’s Genocide novel *La Masseria delle allodole* (2004; *Skylark Farm*, 2006), which with its 36 editions in Italy alone, has sold over 600,000 copies to an Italian readership for the most part previously unaware of the Armenian Genocide. However, it is through the power of translation into more than fifteen languages that *Skylark farm* has surpassed the borders of Italy taking the knowledge of the Armenian Genocide throughout the globe and thereby contributing to its “afterlife”—to use the word of Walter Benjamin (2000)—as well as its cinematic rendering to a global audience” (Haroutyunian, 2016). On Armenian literature in Italy (Vittoria Aganoor and Antonia Arslan) see Haroutyunian, 2020.

military campaign against Russia in 1914. The enlistment of soldiers, even among the Armenian population, would have resulted in a fratricidal war with Armenians living in Russian lands and therefore fighting in Russia's armies. This was the pretext under which the Young Turk party accused the Armenians of treason and began to organise the genocide that began with the great raid in Constantinople during the night of 24 April 1915. Members of the élite were forcibly taken from their homes and driven out of the city to be slaughtered. The massacre of the intellectuals was followed by a widespread operation to remove heads of families from the territory of the empire, with the aim of breaking up Armenian households and deporting the elderly, women and children to the desert, without food, on the border with Mesopotamia, from where they never returned (Ternon, 1996).

The Armenian genocide (Metz Yegh ern, translated into Italian as "great evil" and metaphorised by Arslan as the "dark theatre of the world"), apart from being a next antecedent of the Shoah, is an extremely paradoxical case, as it is characterized by a double trauma: the genocide itself, which led to the programmed extermination of approximately one and a half million of the two million ethnic Armenians living in Turkey, and the denial of the genocide itself (Arslan & Pace, 2015). To this one should add another equally traumatic consequence, namely the great diaspora of persecuted individuals and entire families, whose echo is still alive more than a century later (Hovannisian, 1997). The unexpected loss of the homeland and the violent assault on an entire people merged into the knowledge that the destruction of the very roots of a people had been lucidly planned. Moreover, the loss of the spatial dimension provided by the constant and protracted presence in a territory and the transition to a condition of exile cannot simply be framed in the paradigm of "migration," as in the case of the Armenians who escaped the 1915 genocide it is a question of continuous dispossession from the moment of the forced abandonment of their homes. The brutality and deception with which the deportation was carried out are effectively portrayed in Arslan's novel:

Una retata ben organizzata e letale. Nessuno spieg  loro niente. Furono contati accuratamente, fu verificata la loro identit , e dopo qualche ora furono fatti salire su un treno e avviati verso l'esilio. Questo gli venne detto, e cos  li tennero quieti; ma il programma reale era di dividerli, mandandoli verso diverse destinazioni: e poi di ucciderli un poco alla volta, preferibilmente con imboscate sulle strade poco sicure dell'interno dell'Anatolia—come in effetti avvenne. (Zechihian & Zovighian, 2018, pos. 54)<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the destruction of the family's patronymic is another element of the condition of "orphanhood" that characterises the specificity of the Armenian victims of the genocide. This 'massacre of surnames', as they call it, occurred on at least two

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<sup>4</sup> "A well-organised and lethal raid. Nobody explained anything to them. They were counted carefully, their identity was verified, and after a few hours they were put on a train and sent into exile. This they were told, and so they kept them quiet; but the real plan was to divide them up, sending them to different destinations: and then to kill them bit by bit, preferably by ambush on the unsafe roads in the interior of Anatolia—as indeed happened" (translation mine).

occasions: after the genocide, when the survivors migrated from the Middle East to the West, on that occasion their documents bore the Armenian surname, often distorted by the use of the Arabic-Ottoman spelling; later the surnames underwent a further change to the Latin spelling. The second occasion was Kemal Atatürk's 1935 law, which imposed on all citizens a surname that did not have to indicate their ethnic origin. Thus, Armenians, although they used to have a surname, had to change it to names without the final 'ian'. A peculiar voluntary mutilation of surnames also affected Antonia Arslan's family, since in 1924 her grandfather Yerwant Arslanian—as she recounts in *Skylark Farm*—after the massacre of his family of origin during the Turkish genocide asked the Italian government to change his surname to 'Arslan', to protect his children from possible persecution in Italy:

Ai suoi figli, invece, l'antica patria sarà vietata per sempre, chiusa in una vaga memoria di ciò che è impossibile negare: qualche fotografia, qualche nome. E nel 1924 chiederà al governo italiano il permesso di togliere legalmente dal suo cognome quell'imbarazzante codina delle tre lettere finali 'ian', che denunciano inequivocabilmente l'origine armena. Il nome, amputato, può anche essere turco. (Arslan, 2004, p. 119)<sup>5</sup>

Another interesting linguistic expression that translates the process of loss of one's origin and amputation of the family genealogy is 'oblivion of the fathers'. The lost fathers are both the actual heads of families exterminated during the genocide and, more generally, those who play the role of ancestors of the diaspora community (Orfalian, 2009).

This oblivion or silence of fathers and mothers is jointly generated by the absence of the Armenian genocide in the Western collective memory (Altounian & Altounian, 2007, p. 77), unlike the Shoah, and by the concealment of the trauma experienced by the first generation, which took care not to pass on to their children such a painful legacy or did that with great difficulty. The transfer of this enormous and painful inheritance onto the shoulders of subsequent generations has been the subject of analysis by the French psychoanalyst Janine Altounian, daughter of genocide survivors, who perfectly embodies the process of passing from oblivion to writing:

Il bambino può persino divenire scrittore, e far in tal modo emergere quella zona, rendendo così la letteratura, luogo di sepoltura del padre, una terra dove iscrivere e liberare la propria eredità di figlio o di figlia. (Altounian & Altounian, 2007, p. 64)<sup>6</sup>

Altounian refers to the tragedy experienced by her father, removed and consigned to apparent oblivion by the second generation, which nevertheless pours this "white

<sup>5</sup> "For his sons, however, the old fatherland will forever be forbidden, confined to vague memories of things that cannot be denied: a few photos, a few names. And in 1924, he will petition the Italian government to allow him to legally remove from his surname that embarrassing three-letter suffix, -ian, that exposes so plainly his Armenian origin. His new, truncated name could even be Turkish" (Arslan, 2008, pos. 1729).

<sup>6</sup> "The child can even become a writer, and in this way bring out that area, thus making literature, the father's burial place, a land where he can inscribe and liberate his own inheritance as son or daughter" (translation mine).



memory” into writing in order to understand and process it, thus freeing her parents from removal. As already mentioned, the experience of oblivion in the case of the Armenian genocide was characterised by a double trauma, the one due to the genocide itself and the one determined by its double and lasting denial, both by the Turks and by other countries: in the case of Italy the recognition is very recent, as it dates back to 2019. This also explains why the narrative of trauma has been so troubled within the intergenerational history of Armenian families (Kleinhans, 2019). In the third volume of Arslan’s trilogy dedicated to the genocide, *The Sound of Wooden Pearls* (2015), the author stages this protracted removal and its overcoming through the character of Yerwant, the grandfather (“the patriarch whom no one disobeyed”), a distinguished doctor, on the occasion of the bombing of the city of Padua by the Allies in April 1945:

L'alleanza tra me e nonno Yerwant si stabilì quella sera. Io capii che mi aveva riconosciuto e accettato. Potevo stare tranquilla nella sua ombra che mi proteggeva come un albero grande, una solida quercia piena di nidi. Ma gli alberi non parlano: e lui ormai era davvero stanco, e vecchio, e provato dagli orrori di quella guerra disumana, che gli ricordava la tragedia del suo popolo scomparso. Così aveva bisogno, finalmente, di parlare con qualcuno, di raccontarsi, di giustificarsi per la sua lunga pena. Si sentiva colpevole di essere sopravvissuto. (Arslan, 2015, pp. 52-53)<sup>7</sup>

First the war and then, two years later, the illness of the ‘Little Girl’ (“la Bambina”), i.e. the character who embodies the author in her first years of life, are the two triggering factors that determine the passage from silence to words about the genocide buried in the grandfather’s memory. During the convalescence of the “Little Girl,” he decides to go on a trip to the mountains with his granddaughter. The trip turns out to be the last opportunity for Yerwant to tell his granddaughter about the end of his people before his death (which opens the next chapter):

*Fu così che Yerwant mi portò sotto i glicini dell'albergo alpino Fratelli Doglioni, e mi raccontò per l'ultima volta della sua mamma Iskuhi dalle gote di pesca, di Sempad e Shushanig, di Azniv e Veron, della Piccola città e della fine del suo popolo: a da allora quelle storie rimasero dentro di me, nascoste e vigili e protette nel loro cassetto segreto.* (Arslan, 2015, pp. 74-75)<sup>8</sup>

The use of italics here marks a dimension of the text that is external to the unfolding of events, a voice speaking outside and after the events themselves, as well as the

<sup>7</sup> “The alliance between Grandpa Yerwant and me was forged that evening. I understood that he had recognised and accepted me. I could rest easy in his shadow that protected me like a big tree, a solid oak full of nests. But trees don’t talk and he was now really tired, and old, and tested by the horrors of that inhuman war, which reminded him of the tragedy of his lost people. So, he needed, at last, to talk to someone, to tell his story, to justify his long suffering. He felt guilty for having survived” (translation mine).

<sup>8</sup> “So it was that Yerwant took me under the glycines of the Doglioni Brothers Alpine Hotel, and told me for the last time about his peach-cheeked mother Iskuhi, about Sempad and Shushanig, about Azniv and Veron, about the Small City and the end of its people: and ever since then those stories have remained within me, hidden and watchful and protected in their secret drawer” (translation mine).

time of their occurrence. The last sentence, which refers to the protagonist's propensity to hide within herself the stories told by her grandfather, portrays very well, on a literary level, Altounian's "white memory," which Arslan only manages to turn into a story in her old age. Aleida Assmann rightly emphasises how history and memory are two different modes of remembering, rejecting in this respect both their rigid opposition and their complete identification. This is entirely true in the case of Antonia Arslan, in whose works, both fictional and non-fictional, the two concepts entertain a fruitful relationship. "Functional or living memory," as Assmann defines it, is opposed to "abstract or archival memory," consisting of unorganised memories, and the fundamental characteristics of living memory are precisely those we find in Arslan's works: being inherent to the Italo-Armenian community; selectivity with respect to unorganised memories; ethical dimension and orientation towards the future.

The last volume of the trilogy makes it very clear what the foundations of its author's identity are the account of the family's Armenian past and the omnivorous readings of childhood. "Reading" in particular is mentioned in the fifth chapter, where she tells how "it all began," the origin of her vocation as a writer:

Allora ripensa, la Bambina, a quando tutto ebbe inizio. L'odore dei libri vecchi ben disseccati dal tempo, quando non ci sono muffe né topi, negli armadi-libreria di campagna, con la parte davanti a listelli intrecciati foderati di seta verdina, leggera, piena di polvere. Sedersi per terra a gambe incrociate, soffiando via quella polvere sacra, guardare i dorsi, scegliere e appoggiarsi al muro, nella luce radente di un pomeriggio d'agosto, quando nessuno la cerca e le ore davanti sono infinite, questa è la felicità. (Arslan, 2015, p. 131)<sup>9</sup>

All in all, the origin of her vocation as a "storyteller" is, for Arslan, the "lost homeland beyond the sea" (*Ibid.*, p. 143), bequeathed to her by the stories of her paternal grandfather. The origins erased by the genocide are regained through the passing of the testimonial between generations.

In conclusion, a number of considerations can be made about the concerns of the research project from which the analysis focusing to this author of Armenian origin also stems, at least three of which should be pointed out. The first concerns the relationship between literature and history, threatened by the deadly and final experience of the genocide, which also affected many Armenian intellectuals and writers killed in 1915, who could do nothing against the murderous fury of the persecutors except leave their works as a testament. In this regard, mention can be made of the much celebrated poet Daniel Varujan, translated into Italian by Arslan (Varujan, 2014). The second concerns the question of how literary criticism should deal with works arising from or inspired by the theme of genocide. As in all those cases where the autobiographical component of the fictional story has a significant weight, the

<sup>9</sup> "So think back, the Little Girl, to when it all began. The smell of old books, well dried by time, when there are no moulds or mice, in the country bookshop-cabinets, with the front part made of woven strips lined with greenish silk, light, full of dust. Sitting on the floor with crossed legs, blowing away that sacred dust, looking at the backs, choosing and leaning against the wall, in the grazing light of an August afternoon, when no one is looking for her and the hours ahead are endless, this is happiness" (translation mine).

reader is confronted with the great issue of the forms assumed by the collective and individual narrative memory of the subsequent generations from which these texts originate. The third and last consideration that should be made here concerns the specific case represented by Antonia Arslan's novels. The expression "storyteller," which the author often uses referring to herself, and which in her specific case indicates an activity that she strongly identifies with after retiring from her professional activity as a university professor, shows a very precise choice she makes regarding the heritage of historical and family trauma. The stories told orally by the storyteller traditionally became part of the collective cultural heritage of a community, as in the case of ancient "aedes," minstrels, Celtic "bards" and Scandinavian "scalds" or Anglo-Saxon "scops." Obviously, by using the term *cantastorie*, Arslan is referring to the Italian tradition of the itinerant entertainer who roamed the streets of villages reciting or singing popular poetic compositions, accompanied by a musical instrument. But in her case the storyteller is assimilated to the writer, since writing is the most effective antidote capable of counteracting the erasure of memory following the denial of the genocide. The value of writing and reading is moreover repeatedly evoked by the Paduan writer, who not by chance has devoted another of her novels to the story of the rescue of a book sacred to the Armenian tradition, the Book of Homilies of Mush, the largest existing Armenian manuscript dating back to 1202 and, according to legend, miraculously saved by two women from the rubble of the Monastery of the Holy Apostles in Mush (Arslan, 2012). In this case, it is the story of the rescue of a sacred book, preserved in a monastery located in one of the sites of the Armenian massacres, whose lost memory, the author tells us, has only recently been recovered thanks to new evidence. Not surprisingly, "Telling and Reading" is, as mentioned before, the title of the fifth chapter of the last novel in the Armenian trilogy, in which the act of telling and that of reading or listening perfectly converge in the common aim of piling up "a rich tapestry of stories" (Arslan, 2015, p. 128) in the human mind.

Finally and not surprisingly, the question "why reading?" opens her recent book *La bellezza sia con te* (2018), where the very act of reading is assigned the quality of absolute freedom and, in particular, the reading of family novels of the European tradition (*Buddenbrook* by Thomas Mann and *Il Gattopardo* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa) provides her with a series of tales and stories united by the red thread of love for literature and faith.

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