

Crossing Places of Exile: Sewing the Fragments Back Together
Martine Hovanessian

Presentation text for Accreditation to Supervise Research
29 Avril 2009

This dissertation, as I explain in the Introduction, was written in the desire to contribute to the opening out of an inner landscape, a landscape tormented in many ways, and which cannot be imagined if one is attempting to produce a straightforward monographic study.

What is it about? An adventure similar to “an anthropology of nooks and crannies”, in which I propose to discern the key structural issues of a fragment in the order of the discontinuous identities that came into being through a denial whose structural support is related to the Armenian genocide perpetrated in 1915, but which I enlarge upon in a comparison with the Shoah.

The lamentation over Deir ez Zor, as well as the testimonies collected during a period of many years, gave direction to my project: to develop the features of an extreme exile in which the themes of separation and enforced migration are insufficient notions to convey the condition of the ‘throwaway person’ elaborated by Fethi Benslama, a ‘throwaway’ person who in the case of a collective destruction, of a still not officially recognised State violence, continues to ‘act’, in an almost ‘clandestine’ manner, at one and the same time in the development of a generational continuum (transmission) starting from a radical break and suspended over a gaping hole, but also in a victorious apprehension of a principle of restoration of the ideal of generation, and chiefly carried by the recognised social structures of memory. Without counting, except to explore those experiences of a collapse that haunts the imagination, often with no possibility of translation, I passed through other places than those of oral expression, places of territorialisation aiming to represent the places of ‘the community’ around a will to re-establish an ‘idea of the territory’, an organising principle, a material culture, an adding up of symbols, places of a tormented national imagination in Armenia where irredentist, ethnicised struggles take their form from a failed national question still waiting for a resolution, places criss-crossed with the writings of exile, where the choice of language implies more than supposed, half-hearted claims (or-not) of integration, it also speaks of ‘onboard’ experiences, of reconnection to a symbolic body.

I insist on the connections, which justifies my use of the idea of the ‘fragment’ as a ‘spare part’ that is the consequence of the breaking down of ancient references ‘into little bits’—to use Michel de Certeau’s expression—relics of a lost social entity, detached from the whole of which they had been a part, planted in another social ‘body’, in the manner of the ‘little shards of truth’ that Freud claimed to have discovered in the ‘displacements’ of a tradition, and which no longer have a language to symbolise or reunite them.

“Sewing the Fragments Back Together” is a specific invitation to give an account of, and to expose, these identity-seeking quests for a language in which *débris*, ‘leftovers’, are

deposited in people's memories, but which instead of bearing witness to a displacement of tradition with the possible accommodations that could be expected in a land of exile, and which have the connotation of inventions of continuity, reveal on the contrary—against a background of tragedy—a language that has been destroyed.

The experience of post-catastrophic exile, as shown in post-catastrophic Armenian literature—writings about survival and restoration, my commentaries on Nicolas Sarafian's text translated from the Armenian, *Le Bois de Vincennes*—invites us to work on the question of 'un-belonging', a concept in need of a theory, and which I understand not in the simplistic perspective of 'the loss of a culture', an expression that stirs no resonance in me, but in the sense of a loss of the relationship with the 'other', a splitting off, a state of being enclosed, an incapacity to conceive of 'otherness', to project oneself into a future, given a condition of exile following on a process of de-symbolisation.

For me, genocide and its denial involve a whole, ongoing work around the disappearance of the disappearance, the eradication of traces, the rubbing out of the Names of the Father, the erasure of meaning, the dis-affiliation, the feeling of ruin, subjectivity charged with meaning coming up against objective criteria of the deterioration of a patrimony—a patrimony that is nonetheless celebrated as the carrier of recognition of the violence that had taken place—criteria that resort to political language to express the scale of the destruction: a language with religious accents, "with stone boots," as the poet Mandelstam says, submerged villages, represented as places of purity, and as moral destinations, ancient monuments split open, monuments to the martyrs of 1915, a decapitated political patrimony that was founded on the emancipation of the nation and, for certain political parties, on Marxist foundations, a ruling elite and intellectuals systematically eliminated in Constantinople on April 24, 1915.

It would seem that the mood of this celebration of the patrimony takes on the role of representation that is inscribed in the very limitations of a powerless political language, set at a disadvantage, incapable of developing a period of mourning, a mourning that indeed became a mourning of long duration. So many features of a silent and murderous de-territorialisation inhabiting the imagination, to which are added a migratory memory of dispossession, the escapee-refugees parked in camps, the world of the orphans of the 1920s, statelessness, migratory wandering, the submission of this population stripped of its nationality to recruiters of immigrant labourers for heavy industry in France going to orphanages to distribute work contracts. I had treated this migratory memory of dispossession in *Le Lien Communautaire*, in which I explained that the very nature of the rupture with national origins had given rise to singular social behaviours, notably in efforts at re-founding a 'collective self' on a small scale, based on identifications tied to a place, carried by social practices of enrolment records, where the illusion of a 'new beginning', or continuity, the establishment of inner and outer boundaries, will be treated later through my interrogations about the notion of diaspora [*spiurk*], which I designate as a space of living fiction, sketched against the backdrop of an awareness of the dispersion in the exile, considering again the question of a violence of exclusion that had most definitely occurred. From this point of view, the work of Alain Medam on Jewishness in exile was very helpful, and we participated with several researchers on the uses and semantic field of the notion of diaspora since the 1990s, in a comparative perspective. We believe that exile in its

eschatological dimension and the concept of diaspora are two mutually clarifying notions, inasmuch as both revert to a collapse, to expulsions, to collective exclusions, to repeated persecutions in which notions of group, of minority, of community, ethnic or religious, or of an ethnic-religious ‘community’ of a diaspora, tend to converge towards the notion of a people, a more universal representation of a political conscience, an abstract ideal serving to update certain questions, national causes that have been struck off the map, unresolved, unfinished, ‘poorly buried’, victims of imperialist powers.

This is the reason why we continue our search for conceptual instruments that will enable us to develop an anthropology of modern violence that overlaps simultaneously with an anthropology of the nation and an anthropology of exile.

The stakes seem to lie less in the workability of forms of alliance than in the preservation of the symbolic effectiveness of a link in which it is possible to bring up to date, under diverse and varied forms of the languages and accounts of the rupture, the myths of return, the relationship between capacities of organisation and collective representations undergirded by the will to open up a territory of the singular and of the multiple, combining the traditional modes of the sedentary and those on the move, circumventing the principles of the political institutionalisation of borders, while at the same time creating ties with a ‘political centre’.

Belonging to a diaspora also reflects a culture that has become marginal, a culture of prudence and negotiation between distance and nearness, by virtue of weaving one’s way through the games of power, and of having endured oppression and persecutions, by virtue of an apprenticeship in being ‘without rights’. The experience of a new configuration born of ‘misfortune’ draws its strength at the same time from a mode of dispersion of the most prestigious elites (the merchant colonies of the 17th century, the intellectual elites of the 19th century), making it possible to confer a positive value, a historicity, to the present experience of dispersion.

The diaspora is also a place of authorized nomadism, a synonym not of a wandering equated with a loss of meaning and of points of reference, but of a wandering linked to the space-time of a collective history, simultaneously defining a place of freedom, an escape route, the ideal place where one can best live as foreigners, by being given the right to combine identities. Thus for Chantal Bordes-Benayoun, the question of the relation to the Other is at the heart of the diasporas: “The diaspora requires an effort of sublimation of ‘otherness’ through a collection of answers that reconcile multiple demands of loyalty’.¹

This particular work of mine does not belong in the category of ‘the duty of memory’ so often instilled through a doubtful political discourse that produces dependence on a stereotypical, standardised form of writing (including writings stuck on the phenomenon of

diasporas), but rather in the category of nuances, of hesitant steps, doubts reinstated by certain poetic or literary texts exhorting us to evoke a condition of survival linking a particular report to space-time, vacillating in the present, and whose written output perpetuates the very condition in question. We stress the idea of a ‘repertory of practices’ that form the body of the ‘assets’ of belonging, that is, a structure of action. At the same time, this repertory delineates an economy of language that avoids the tone of institutional doctrines, unconventional, subversive forms that resist all efforts at ideological or normative translation. The study of writings on violence is distributed over a broad spectrum; the texts are often characterised by their subordinate status in comparison to writings based on academic learning: *reactive texts developed by organic intellectuals, between scholarly and political texts, oral testimonies, personal diaries, literary essays, family memoirs, psychoanalytical studies, aesthetic creations, poetic writings, epistolary exchanges, texts translated from one language to another*².

The writings of Charlotte Delbo, of Georges Pérec, through selected extracts, are not motivated by a cathartic literary intention, but by an impossibility, the impossibility of adhering to “this institution of bearing witness”, and summon up voices, prolonging the existence of the “body” of the people, plunge into the ever-present indescribable and unrepresentable, approach the edges of the void and of the strangeness contained in a vaporisation of the subject that can no longer connect to the “other”, where nothing now “holds the subject” anymore, and connecting at many points with my own journey as a subject placed at the crossroads of catastrophes that have occurred, unable to localise the place of a vague and intrusive anxiety. A place of extreme exile, a place where one is “beside oneself”, a place of the crushing of the possibility of symbolising life and death. Distraction, loss of boundaries, wanderings in exile where points of departure and points of arrival cancel each other out.

“Sewing the Fragments Back Together” is a project of reconfiguration of what cannot be expressed, and this has necessitated other methodological supports than the translation of denial by certain historians of the Armenian genocide whose colossal work around the search for proof and the historic meaning through archives has contributed to bringing to light a mechanism of negation, a historiographic perversion that makes use of the processes of rationalisation, of relativising and of trivialising, to refute the factor of intentionality at the heart of the genocidal principle, and produce, according to Richard Hovanissian, a hodgepodge of half-truths, of infinite circumlocutions that are infinitely more devastating than total negation.

As an anthropologist, and returning by choice to my early literary training, making use of the particular sensibility that is developed after a long experience of psychoanalysis as an analyst, I have favoured the nomadic and perceptible (‘felt’) forms of exile, without in any way wishing to prove something, and I threw myself into the work of subjectivation, that of the process that calls for the maturation of the subject.

I think it is necessary to free oneself from the injunction to ‘prove’ something, the order of the torturer, some would say, in the search for ultimate proof, a sort of tyranny set in motion by the actors of political power, the language of domination in which the status of the victim is transformed into a teary plaint, de-politicised to “make room” for polysemous subjectivisms, narrations, evocations. To leave the discourse of historic proof of the annihilation and of self-justification, and allow myself to move to a form of writing in which denial has struck me in my own autobiographical trajectory, my family novel, my researcher’s journey, and whose seams I am attempting to sew. “Letting oneself go” means catching a glimpse of the freedom of the subject, allowing the subject to catch up with himself as he takes off his chains and frees himself from alienation in and through this crossing over. Leaving the context of proof as an element in a process of establishing a scientific reality that would provide support for a procedure of authentication and an imperative of veracity. Allowing oneself to be carried by the threads of the disconnection (narrative anthropology, poetic metaphor).

In this way, the terrain in this case concerns not only the presence in a geographical place or in a social unit for the present-day analysis of social relations, but involves a much more complex configuration. The terrain is also the breadth of the links and associations with other temporalities that the signifieds collected in an empirical space will help to achieve with other temporalities, calling for other supports, other crossing places, in order to form a mixed semiotic. Gérard Althabe, who was my thesis supervisor (1993), in his theory of the position of the researcher ‘on the ground’, already favored a heuristic approach, which advances by trial and error and in stages, inviting us to carry out the ‘to-ing and fro-ing’ and the links between levels which add up cumulatively or are superimposed in the interpretation of an act or an event, at several levels of resonances, on several scales³.

Not a blending, but a mixed semiotic in which exile as a total social reality calls for a superimposition of planes, of levels of interpretation, giving rise to the use of multiple supports, as we have said, in order to create a text, a body of literature, a web peopled with voices and phantoms, from which would surge dissociations, cleavages, dismantlings, splinters, cries and quests, as well as heroic struggles, and which at the same time would offer a way—perhaps an aesthetic and utopian way—of seeing foreclosure as a reality in the past.

Obviously the issue of the relationship of the researcher to his object is raised in the haunting question of distance and nearness, of “too much attachment” to the object, which could distort the way of seeing, or else contribute to an “ethnicisation”, a reification, that would confuse the understanding of one’s purpose. This would be to misunderstand the direction of my approach: not to formulate truths of the order of the propaganda discourse of a group, but to address a philosophical question: “How and why write about ‘a devastation’ ” of a collective magnitude that has affected far more than the subjectivity of the researcher, obliging him/her to carry out the restoration of something unimagineable. There must be great constraint in this exercise, in my case not the constraint of the literature associated with the pleasure of the un-linking, but that of an existential pressure to glue the fragments back together, to sew them together, to fill in, not to repair or bring about recognition, but to

reconnect with a dimension of the “normally alive”. And at this point, psychoanalysis introduces a considerable theoretical contribution that works on dissociations, impossible means of access to the ordinary extended memory, in the sense of a diversionary release mechanism. I think of the work of the psychoanalyst Anne Lise Stern, a student of Lacan’s, in her book *Le Savoir Déporté* after Auschwitz, in which the writing constructs the conditions of her release. On the contrary, I wish to say, that sort of proximity with the object, instead of being a place of enclosure, opens up the horizon, a sort of “unconscious of the text”, distinct from that of both author and reader which, as Julia Kristeva, psychoanalyst and semiotician, specifies, opens towards “scenes of representations, of modalities, of psychic inscriptions, traces, marks, distinctiveness”, breaches as well, which in my view are opposed to the smooth writing of the dissertation that slides over the signifier.

What can we say of this ‘engaged’—committed—writing that has been emphasised, and of my position as a ‘committed’ researcher? If we speak of ‘engaged’ literature in work about subjectivisms that reconsider the weight of a historiographical perversion, questioning again a dynamic of impunity, asking again the why of the genocide “without reason”, then at this point I affirm that my writing is ‘committed’. But if instead of that, one ‘ethnicises’ a cause, I would agree that it is a question of a return of perversion, in which ‘commitment’ becomes militancy, in the sense that the researcher becomes the mouthpiece of a community. Ethnocentrism in researchers has often been denounced, whether they be historians or others, who attempt to show the mechanism of perversion at work in the Armenian genocide of 1915 and its denial. Just as the leaders of the CUP (Ittihad or Committee of Union and Progress) used the shameful nationalist argumentation with respect to the Armenians and in the context of the First World War to justify the mass massacres that international law has difficulty qualifying as genocide, as is shown by the elimination of Paragraph 30 in 1979 in the report on the question of the prevention and suppression of the crime of genocide in the sub-commission on Human Rights at the U.N., when this same commission, in 1974, had recognized the genocide of the Armenians as the first genocide of the Twentieth Century. The stakes in the definition remain highly topical, and certain politicians prefer to evoke the expression ‘incomparable atrocities’ rather than use the term ‘genocide’.

I hope that this work in a meandering style that I claim as my own, conscious of complexity and the spiral, will contribute to restoring, under my pen, the substance of an unspeakable reconfiguring, in which denial has produced this type of knowledge, a body of writing, a notion that I and Maryse Tripier, as she accompanied me in this arduous labour, have attempted to theorise.