

YERVANT ODIAN



By MESROB KERMANIKIAN

MANY may find it ironic that humor and satire should exist at all in Armenian literature. Armenians are usually imagined as solemn, ceremonial and often somber and gloomy people—and not illogically since almost every page of their history is part of a continuing narrative of struggle for national survival.

"The comic," Bergson asserts, "comes into being when society and the individual, freed from their worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as a work of art." The Armenian has hardly had a chance, in this sense, to regard himself as a work of art and hence embellish his national

countenance—something free and secure peoples only seem able to undertake.

In spite of its history, however, Armenian literature is not devoid of humor. There is enough proof of this in the work of Yervant Odian alone.

His laughter was of a unique order; a natural and human response that was often exaggerated into the hysterical. His *purpose* was to mirror the absurdities of the time. His *objective* was the triumph of justice and morality, as it is in most cases of popular humor. To this end he portrayed human weaknesses with a satirical emphasis that lies between the comic and the appalling.

Born in a suburb of Istanbul, Turkey, in 1869, in an era when the Armenian comic sense was

achieving its full expression—for the most part through the brilliant and courageous work of Hagop Baronian—O dian was sickly as a child. His illness, however, was not without its blessings: special French and Armenian tutors instructed him privately at home. He learned a great deal too from his aunt, Yevpine Odian, and traveled extensively with his uncle to different parts of Europe. Even with such unconventional schooling, the bright and imaginative boy recoiled from the dull lessons in grammar, eagerly seeking, instead, the fairy tales of Iskouhi Hanem, another aunt.

His formal training was limited to the single year of 1882, when he emerged as the top student in his class at the Berberian School. Beyond that, his great fund of knowledge was gained primarily through his own efforts.

O dian made his first literary mark at the age of 23, with *The Victim of Love*, a short novel that, even so early in his career, showed the essential characteristics of his talent. The story was published in one of the leading newspapers of the time, Hairenik, edited by the journalist and author Arpiar Arpiarian. In an atmosphere charged with fear of persecutions and massacres, under the regime of Sultan Hamid, this publication represented "the only breathing spell for Odian and many other writers".

No effective tradition could have been sustained in the chaotic years that followed. Odian barely saved his life in the murderous persecutions of 1896. He left the country in an exile that lasted more than a decade. They were not wasted years, however, and their story is told in the memorable and absorbing book, *Twelve Years Away from Constantinople*, in which is reflected the abysmal melancholy he felt as he wandered alone in strange towns and observed "strange" ways of living. Here curiosity blends with sentimentality, ending in a mood of disillusionment.

In his exile, Odian fought against the abuses of the existing national political parties, criticized Turkish policies, and attacked the oppressive influences of the landlords and the *pashas* in such books as *Bloody Memoirs*, *The Parasites of Revolution*, *The Propagandist*, as well as with articles in the newspapers Free Pulpit, Law, Fire and others.

Stung by the savage thrusts of his satire, the "nationalists" reacted violently to the publication of his books and in the winter of 1905, in Egypt, they organized and attacked him.

The Free Pulpit described the assault in this manner: "At about 8:30, when Yervant Odian

walked out of his house, where he had been ill in bed for two days, to go to the office of the Free Pulpit, two men suddenly attacked him—on Abou Dardar Street near the wall of St. Xavier School—shouting: 'How could you dare write against our *Pasha*', and beating him severely. Fortunately the cries of our friend were heard and before a crowd could gather his assailants ran away, hurling such threats as 'if you dare write again, something worse will happen'."

THE threat was ineffective, however, and Odian continued to protest against injustice, to criticize and deflate the existing banalities and pomposities in public life, to mimic and ridicule the disheartening inadequacy of our teachers, religious leaders and public servants.

He had his own acid interpretation of some of the pretentious invocations made by the "orators" and "public servants" of his time:

When they thundered that "this is the will of the people", Odian could only understand them to mean: *I desire it that way.*

When their oratorical inflections quivered in defense of the constitution, their implication could only be: *You should elect me as your representative.*

When they proclaimed in righteous indignation: "We demand a full accounting", Odian could easily discern the insidious shadow of the question: *How about my share?*

And when they invoked the mauled and martyred name of principle, did they not really mean: *For my own sake?*

In 1908 an important event took place in Turkey. The revolution of the "Young Turks" ended the rule of Hamid II and the beginning of a "new life" seemed to be in prospect. Odian was encouraged by these circumstances to return to Constantinople, but was quickly disillusioned. "I looked around for something new, for some improvement . . . I was terribly disappointed." Disappointed too were all those who believed in the new regime, as their hopes collapsed and new massacres followed.

The continuing deportations and upheavals drained the vigor and stunted the development of Armenian culture. In spite of this, however, the period from 1908 to 1914 was a prolific one for Odian. During these years he wrote some of his best works, among them the historical novels *Abdul Hamid and Sherlock Holmes* (three volumes)

and *Saliba Hanem* (also three volumes), such novels and novelettes as *I Don't Accept the Outsider* and *Family, Honor and Morality*, the satirical *Comrade Panchoonie* in two parts, and *Our Deputies*.

At the same time he was busy publishing four humorous monthlies, editing the *Arevelk* (East) newspaper, and writing articles for other newspapers in Constantinople. He did translations from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, completed two comedies, *Zavallen* and *The 67th Article of the Constitution*, as well as a tragedy, *Vartan Mamigonian*.

All this creative energy was suddenly stilled in May 1915. With thousands of his countrymen he was seized and exiled to the Arabian deserts. "At the inception," he writes of these deportations, "I could not fully grasp the immensity of the tragedy; but when I witnessed the death of thousands, I realized that with each martyred Armenian I was losing part of my soul."

Miraculously surviving these atrocities, he returned to Constantinople in 1918, believing that, with the war ended, conditions had changed for the better. He resumed his literary activities, writing *The Cursed Years*, *Literary Memoirs*, *The Woman with the Green Umbrella*, *The Pearl Necklace*, *Dalita*, *The Nouveaux Riches*, *Heroes of Clay*, and other novels.

It did not last. In 1922, when new persecutions began, he left Constantinople for the last time, living for a while in Beirut, then Bucharest, and finally returning in 1925 to Egypt, his second homeland, where he died the following year.

Odian lived in an era when great disturbances were shaking the structure of Armenian national life. New political parties were organized: the Hunchagian Party in 1880, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation in 1890, and the Armenian Democratic Party in 1908. These organizations, at least initially, shared the common purpose of fighting Turkish despotism.

Odian turned the sharp edge of his satire against all excesses and ostentations, political and otherwise. About his purpose he himself wrote: "Our whip will reach equally the layman and the cleric, the minister and the clerk, the deputy and the trustee, the journalist, the field worker, revolutionist and the anti-revolutionist; each will have his share. We need to uncover our Pharisees and Sadducees, so everyone will see their infamy."

Odian made full imaginative use of living characters and contemporary scenes, and created a type of humor that was new in Armenian literature.

"In Odian's art," writes the author Levon Pashalian, "we find the mixture of the French *esprit* and English humor, which excelled the eastern philosophy. We think of Mark Twain, Jerome K. Jerome and Alphonse Daudet whenever we utter his name. His *Panchoonie* undoubtedly would have been a universally known character if Odian had been born French."

ENGER PANCHOONIE (*Comrade Good-for-nothing*) is unquestionably a masterpiece. *Panchoonie* represents an Armenian Revolutionary Federation propagandist who is assigned by his party to visit the provinces and revive the nationalistic spirit among the people. The book is a series of letters (the two parts representing two separate missions) in which he reports his activities and adventures to his superiors.

In his preface, Odian disclaims authorship of the letters and ascribes his possession of them to fortuitous chance, and his publication of them to his sense of public duty. Having created *Panchoonie* he seeks in this manner to give him the dimension of reality. He even rejects any satiric intent, "for the real author is an Armenian Socialist revolutionary of resounding faith, fortified by firm principles, who has explored the most remote boundaries of seriousness and there entrenched himself . . ."

Odian precedes the letters with a long biographical sketch of the character (part of which has been translated in the ensuing section) in which he bitingly exposes the ignorance, vanity and monstrous arrogance of the type of man to which the vital missionary work of national revival was entrusted. *Panchoonie's* career is revealed as something more than a series of picturesque and amusing misadventures. In *Panchoonie's* character the psychology of most Armenian nationalistic parties is uncovered and mercilessly ridiculed. And it could not have been an easy thing for Odian to do: to point up the weaknesses and follies of movements that sought, no matter how ineffectually, to serve the national interest. But Odian felt a moral obligation to his conscience and his art that would permit no compromise. Whatever his duties to his nation, he had also his duty to himself.

On the following pages are translated excerpts from Comrade Panchoonie, including a section from the biographical notes, the preface and several of the letters from the first part of the book.