

FIGURES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

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THE CITY OF THE FUTURE IN AGOP MELKONYAN'S *MURDER IN NEW BABYLON*

PART ONE

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In our previous discussion, I introduced Agop Melkonyan as a writer through the exploration of man and the machine in some of his more well-known works. Now, I will continue my reflections on the same author's work, and we will delve into aspects of his fiction that were not previously touched upon. However, the approach will be slightly different: instead of discussing multiple works, I will focus on one. Instead of analyzing a specific theme developed across different works, I will examine in more detail the artistic world in the novella *Murder in New Babylon*, a text that presents the anti-utopia as an immutable possibility for humanity, one that cannot be erased by the course of history or technological advancement, by progress that is unaccompanied by moral development. At the same time, the novella offers a striking parody of the typical science fiction setting, the biblical myth of Babylon, and crime plots, as well as many comical caricatures of famous historical figures, inserted as characters. All this is achieved through narrative techniques commonly associated today with postmodern writing, especially the enhanced use of intertextual connections and metalepsis. Intertextuality plays a key role in constructing the parodic layer of the text, while metalepsis, achieved through the presence of the Author as a character within his own work, allows the novella to distance itself from both socialist and Western science fiction aesthetics, and enables the expression of a socially engaged critique of the future and the present.

In this first part of the discussion, I will go through the crime narrated in the novella, the intertwined parody and satire, and the anti-utopian dimensions of the societal system depicted in the text, which ultimately prove to be a constant in human history. In the second part, I will explore the parodic layer of science fiction and the biblical myth, as well as the role of the Author as a character in the literary piece.

But before we get into the essence of the discussion, a brief informational preface wouldn't hurt. The work was first published in the collection *Via Dolorosa* (1987), from which, in our previous discussion, I analyzed two works—the novella *Via Dolorosa* and the short story "The Days of the Snail." *Murder in New Babylon* is among the most anthologized of the author's texts, reissued in the collection *Shadows of Flesh* (1999), and later featured in two posthumous collections of Melkonyan's selected works - *Up the Staircase* (2008) and *Pathway to Beyond* (2019). It was also published as a standalone book by Gaiana Publishing in 2016. The work's popularity is further evidenced by its stage adaptation in the 21st century by the actor Valery Elitchov (in his own dramatization). Clearly, there is both an interest in the text from both readers and publishers alike, which reflects its special status in Melkonyan's bibliography, presenting it as one of his significant creative achievements.

I would like to start by offering some observations on the poetic nature of *Murder in New Babylon*. Firstly, the novella stands in notable contrast to the other texts in the collection *Via Dolorosa*. Lyudmila Stoyanova highlights the difference between “the elegiac lyricism of the novellas in the first part of the collection and the biting sarcasm of *Murder in New Babylon*, found in the second part” (Stoyanova 1996: 157). It is true that the monologues (both internal and external) of the characters and the serious philosophical reflections typical of most of the author's works are absent here, or at least they are not present in the same way. However, this does not mean that the text lacks philosophical depth or artistic and intellectual ambition beyond successful humor and caricature; rather, these must be sought in the comedic and dialogical elements that dominate the work themselves. In other words, the serious philosophical monologues are replaced by the often absurd, yet not meaningless, dialogues between characters in *Murder in New Babylon*.

The following features of the novella are also important: Agop Melkonyan wields intertextuality and metalepsis more freely here than in any other of his texts. Through and alongside these, other elements characteristic of postmodern writing - such as the metafictional nature of the work, parody, and the blending of "high" and "low" art - become apparent. What brings the novella's extensive intertextuality to the forefront is its active use of allusions, references, quotes, and "grafts" from foreign texts, be it ideas or even characters. Indeed, many of the characters in *Murder in New Babylon* are caricatured versions of historical figures (I'll mention only a few – Blaise Pascal, Marcus Aurelius, Omar Khayyam). The density of intertextual connections and historical allusions also plays a significant role in creating a fusion of different time periods in New Babylon and the vulgarization of cultural heritage in this version of the future.

Murder in New Babylon opens with the arrival of Joasaph the Wanderer, "as if from the quantum vacuum (that is, from nothing)" (Melkonyan 1987: 73) in New Babylon. From the portrait description of Joasaph, I should highlight that, presumably due to a genetic mutation, he has a halo over his head, and since he has developed such an organ of sanctity, he feels obliged to behave like a saint, making him a counterpoint to the moral laxity of New Babylon.

The city itself is described as follows:

Hidden behind the columns of the Neopropylea, drunken men with the focus of scientists emptied their bladders at length; crimson with excitement, reckless illusionists swallowed swords recklessly only to spew them out as flames a moment later; jolly urchins raced through the markets, smugly riding bionic reptiles; itinerant vendors of holographic memories and Venusian flowers peddled their cheap stock in their sly voices; no starships were visible in the sky when a strange man of indeterminate age and a faded canvas sack on his back passed through the city gates of New Babylon (Melkonyan 1987: 73).

In just one sentence, we are presented with a complete fusion of times and cultural practices - riding bionic reptiles takes place alongside the more ancient practice of sword swallowing. The Bacchic feasts, typical of ancient Greece, are once again practiced in the future. Even at the level of lexis, we can observe the blending of jargons that the name "Babylon"

suggests, by comparing scientific terms like "bionic" with colloquial (even dialectal) words like "sack".

Soon after his arrival in the city, Joasaph the Wanderer meets Blaise Pascal, whose path to New Babylon is left unexplained, but whose activities there are clear: he spends much of his time drinking, having degenerated into a drunkard and libertine, whose previous knowledge and skills are now entirely useless: "I was both a mathematician, and a philosopher. I was a few other things too. Now I am a former" (Melkonyan 1987: 76). As the two form a friendship, noise erupts in a nearby tavern, where it turns out that a murder has been committed.

The victim is Cato Marcus Aurelius (obviously a version of Marcus Aurelius), and the scene resembles the typical plot setup where bystanders at the crime scene begin searching for the culprit. The very title, *Murder in New Babylon*, recalls an Agatha Christie novel, and her name is not missed between the lines: "Ah, if only it were Shakespeare, or Agatha Christie, they'd spin a tale that'd make your head spin! But no - we're not that lucky, we've fallen into the hands of a scribbler" (Melkonyan 1987: 87). The investigation is first conducted by the Private, a character who voluntarily takes up the task of finding the guilty party and interrogating the other participants, because, in his own words: "A man in uniform is clothed in power" (Melkonyan 1987: 80). What is significant about this character is that he feels empowered solely because of his uniform, not because of any position, ability, or expertise, as would typically be the case in a crime novel.

The investigation is later taken over by Detective Legré, who is both a parody of detective figures (Maigret, Sherlock Holmes, Avakum Zahov, etc.) and a mockery of socialist investigators and their methods. A prime example of the latter is his reliance, during the investigation, on a "dogiere" - a five-legged alien, clearly evoking associations with a dog, which has highly developed senses of smell, touch, and sight. It serves as an operative informant, much like those frequently used by socialist investigators. The Private and Legré are the first figures in the novella through whom the repressive system of the city is presented. Both insist on the existence of a culprit, even though, during the interrogations, the person who actually stabbed the "victim" (who turns out to be Omar Khayyam) confesses, and it is later revealed that the "victim"

is still very much alive, having simply fainted from being struck with a plastic knife. I'll quote a passage from this investigation that nicely characterizes Legré:

- *Write this down - he ordered the dogiere. - Fresh tracks... Probably from a person with all their legs intact. Conclusion: the killer is not disabled. Shoes, size 42. Conclusion: the killer is not a child. No traces of canes or prosthetics were observed.*
- *Those are my tracks, sir... - the Citizen tried to explain, but Inspector Legré cut him off:*
- *Don't interfere. A red hair was found near the corpse, medium elasticity, durable structure, split at the tip, likely from the head of Blaise Pascal.*
- *Please, Inspector, I went gray six centuries ago - Blaise almost cried* (Melkonyan 1987: 94).

Legré never gives up and eventually arrests Joasaph and Blaise, as they appear more suspicious than the other characters.

The second part of *Murder in New Babylon* describes the proceedings against them, where additional empowered figures appear, all named after their professions, clearly depersonalized: the Mayor, the Prosecutor, the Judge. Through them, the image of a totalitarian societal system, strongly resembling similar regimes in the historical reality of the 20th century, becomes even clearer. Let's look at the description of this system through the "futuristic" court:

The court of the future, dear reader, differs fundamentally from the court of the present. If you could see the judge, for instance, he would remind you more of a pope - a majestic silk robe (white, the color of justice, as it contains all possible colors) with gold embroidery, a high crown adorned with artificial diamonds, and a scepter in hand. The Prosecutor resembles a servant of the Holy Inquisition - a black cone with two slits for eyes, while the lawyer looks like an ancient Greek rhetorician from the time of Pericles, or a short while after that, say Demosthenes, delivering the funeral oration for the fallen at Chaeronea, though not as bald (Melkonyan 1987: 121).

By likening the judge and inquisitor to similar figures from the past, their universal nature is highlighted - the eternal presence of empowered repressive figures in history. I will quote further, this time from the portrayal of the Prosecutor and his ideology:

We must uncover the truth, because democracy doesn't like hidden agendas. If anyone thinks that democracy will allow them to do whatever they want, they are bitterly mistaken. Democracy is democracy precisely because it doesn't allow such things (Melkonyan 1987: 122).

And further:

The Prosecutor also intervened: we have a doctrine, as they say, tested and tempered in battles with heretics and traitors, which has withstood the test of time, and now various creators suddenly decide to subject it to reevaluation, as if doctrines are things that can be reevaluated (Melkonyan 1987: 127).

This passage reveals that New Babylon operates under a pseudo-democratic totalitarian system with a definitive "doctrine" that already contains all the answers.

Ultimately, after a completely illogical trial, Joasaph and Blaise are sentenced for murder, even though the "victim" is among the witnesses during the trial. However, they are not punished for the crime they were accused of, but for entirely different reasons. Joasaph, for acting as the wandering love of the world and living virtuously, and Blaise Pascal, for insulting officials and writing books filled with thoughts. While the characters are not executed, Joasaph's halo is guillotined, and Blaise receives a year and a half in prison.

With this overview of the novella's conclusion, I finish the first part of this discussion. Next time, I will continue with a more detailed look at the parody in the text and the Author's role as a character within his own world.