

# FIGURES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

SOFIA, NATIONAL POLYTECHNIC MUSEUM

## MACHINE AND MAN IN AGOP MELKONYAN'S WORKS OF FANTASTIC FICTION AND SCIENCE FICTION

### PART TWO

**Anton Nikolov, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski**

**Assoc. Prof. Nadezhda Stoyanova, PhD (supervisor)**

**Translated from Bulgarian by Velina Dimitrova**

Following the introductory part of the discussion, we can now move on to specific texts. I will begin with the novella *Memory of the World* (1980), followed by the short stories *The Days of the Snail* (1987) and *Movement and Misery* (1987), and the novellas *Via Dolorosa* (1987) and *My Poor Bernardie* (1983). *Memory of the World* can very easily be classified as science fiction, unlike most of Melkonyan's works. In the novella, readers are introduced to the story of Isail (an acronym for Integrally Selective and Adaptive Intelligence based on Lomov), artificial intelligence created by a team of four scientists. The narrative intertwines Isail's recordings and memories with the scientists' recollections of their interactions with him. Melkonyan's Isail, much like Mary Shelley's monster (the literary prototype for Isail), immediately disgusts and disappoints its creators, who in turn disappoint Isail himself:

*I still had no clear idea of people; I had only seen them in anatomy textbooks and in the paintings of the Old Masters: large, harmonious, with sinewy muscles and almond-shaped eyes. Mighty hands, biceps, skulls - no matter whether it was David or the Thinker. Lies! The truth repels: a pockmarked face, scarred by smallpox, thick glasses behind which watery eyes watch*

*you with contempt. 'Do you see?' he asked. 'There's nothing to see,' I replied, and those were my first words* (Melkonyan 1980:183, 184).

The first impression of the humans, in turn, is as follows: “We had always spoken of him with affection; we were accustomed to his appearance, but as a machine. The moment he came to life, a distance between us appeared. (...) Each of us thought: Lord, this cannot be my own creation!” (Melkonyan 1980:185, 186). It is clear what triggers the conflict between the scientists and the machine: the fact that their creation is not entirely “as a machine.” Equipped only with human information and a database to build upon, Isail’s mental life (and consequently, his character) closely resembles that of a human, even if his exterior is made of metal. Furthermore, the scientists had hoped for a device that humanity could use at will. However, Isail is a sentient being capable of imagination, whose inner life reflects the human experience - a life that includes desires and needs (including the need for autonomy), entirely incompatible with the role of a mere tool. In one of the more detailed readings of *Memory of the World*, Elena Borisova draws importance on the following:

*Yet the final product turns out to be both an emotionally rich creation and a physically crippled being. It receives information about the human experience, its sensory perception, the insight derived from education, but is deprived of the means through which to acquire empirical knowledge - the body* (Borisova 2019).

Isail’s greatest yearning is indeed for a body - not just because it allows the accumulation of empirical data (related to sensory perception), which is unattainable for the immaterial intelligence, but because it enables a subject to exercise autonomy, to move away from the position imposed upon them by another: “I wish I could take a walk, even if only a hundred meters by the sea, and that’s why I hate them - they gave me a human consciousness, human thoughts, human sensations, yet they made me immobile and helpless” (Melkonyan 1980: 205). In this case, instead of the soul seeking liberation from the body as a form of imprisonment (an imposed boundary related to mortality and the experience of pain), Isail’s scattered mind, housed in twelve across the Earth, longs for the opposite. In this respect, Isail is radically different from Melkonyan’s scientists. The same paradox occurs in the short story *Days of the Snail*, as Elena Borisova highlights:

*It is paradoxical that the artificial being aspires toward all things human, while humans themselves attempt to detach from not only their environment but everything that connects them to it* (Borisova 2019).

Unable to achieve equality with the same rights as the humans in the society created by them, Isail begins to entertain the idea of destroying the human world and creating a new one. His ambition culminates in bringing down a passenger plane - a deed that achieves nothing but incurs revenge; revenge for which Isail later feels remorse. After the crime, his energy sources are shut down, but it turns out there is enough residual power to keep him alive for 700 years. Preserving hope that a better future might await him, Isail must stop thinking (and so conserve his energy). Thus, he transforms into a mechanical Christ (even in his final moments, Isail envisions himself crucified), a suffering God, who came to Earth and was subsequently crucified by humans, awaiting his resurrection. *Memory of the World* undoubtedly carries the ethical charge of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and serves as a warning against unethical scientists who create, in this case - life, without being concerned with whether this is morally right. What's more, it is also a piece expressing skepticism towards the idea that a consciousness created based on human experience and inner world would not share the distress regarding its limitations, a drive to transcend them, and a sense of itself as an autonomous being.

I will stop the discussion of *Memory of the World* here – it is a work in which we find a direct conflict between the human perspective and that of a sentient machine. Contrary to this, in many of Melkonyan's works, humans are not repulsed by the machine but instead wish to become akin to it, mistakenly believing that replacing flesh with metal and sensitivity with insensibility will spare them from the suffering characterizing mortal, finite beings – primarily, the fear of an inevitable death. This is how the story *Days of the Snail* concludes, where the ailing scientist Velinov decides to transfer his consciousness into a mechanical body. The narrative of *Days of the Snail* traces the scientists' friendship with a fantastical snail who identifies as the reincarnated Hans Christian Andersen, the embodiment of fragility and compassion. After Velinov's metamorphosis, despite the story being told in the first person until that point, the narrative shifts to the third person, and the reader is denied access to the scientist's inner life – the only thing mentioned about him is that his gaze is filled with rage and hatred. The Man of Iron's first act is to return home and crush his friend. It is unclear whether the narrator

remains Velinov, given that he has become the Rodulus, the Man of Iron, and thus it is uncertain whether the scientist has achieved anything other than a different kind of death. Alternatively, the rage and hatred may be caused by the fact that even the transfer into a mechanical body has not eliminated his vulnerability to time and death. After all, Velinov may not die from the disease that torments him, but a shell of no material is eternal. A similar motif - using technology to combat time and death - also appears in another famous novella, *Via Dolorosa*. The end of this novella reveals that a scientist who has lost his wife and children in a car accident pays every two weeks for mechanical replicas of them - dolls that behave like them, and is utterly incapable of accepting the loss. Each week, the dolls reenact the final days of his family's lives, including the accident. The mechanical replicas, in fact, provide only false solace that only amplifies the character's pain. Machines cannot pave a path beyond death or provide an antidote to the suffering caused by it.

The last work I will present to you is the anti-utopian novella *My Poor Bernardie* - one of the few Bulgarian anti-utopias. Bernardie is a theater director who leads a troupe of bio-robots capable of deeply feeling and experiencing the works they perform. The very narrator of the story is one of them. The troupe performs in a world devoid of emotion where people are careful not to exceed their daily limit for psychological exertion, and where laws such as the "Sacred Law of Emotional Restraint" exist. Accordingly, theater is viewed negatively, as a primitive form of art, due to showcasing emotional displays. Bernardie's troupe runs into trouble after their performance of *Hamlet* affects an ordinary guard so much that his heart stops the next day (it could not handle the psychological strain). It turns out that beneath the surface of automatism, humanity has not escaped its nature and the potential for intense emotionality, but has in fact become hypersensitive. It is revealed that this is a totalitarian initiative, which, like a defense mechanism, is an attempt to escape reality. The bio-robots of Bernardie (and Bernardie himself) provide a humanizing perspective in even this dystopian future.

According to Lyudmila Stoyanova, the human-like robots are humanized primarily through the contrast with the real humans:

*The writer has transformed a group of bio-robots into marionettes - puppets from some traveling troupe - and then ironically humanized them to emphasize the emotional deafness of the people around them, the emotional deficit of the technologized person (Stoyanova 2009: 25).*

There is contrast and opposition indeed, but I am not sure that this is the sole reason for the consciousness of the bio-robots; the machines are humanized in other stories by Melkonyan as well but without making the opposition between them and an excessively technologized society poignant (for example, the car in *Movement and Misery* is jealous of the passenger's love for a girl rather than of the girl herself). On the one hand, these stories reflect the typical 20th-century (and our own) belief in humanity's ability to create a thinking and feeling machine, and on the other hand, they seek a different (fantastical and inhuman) perspective to evaluate and pass judgment on humanity. The mechanical mind acts as a judge in passages like this one, where VV+ 561 delivers the following monologue:

*And this is where my doubts begin: is it worth being human? Fanatically unnecessary like Bernardie. Small and cowardly like Webster. Hesitant and miserable like Hamlet. Or vile and repulsive like Doctor Morley. Such are people, Princess. Has it worth to be like them?*

*They have everything. They have more than a protein vessel needs to survive on this planet. They need food, fire, and books—nothing more, yet they have all a spoiled, self-indulgent egotist could desire. They are like overflowing cups, so they do not ring when struck. Look - they invented theater, and then what? We mourn, love, cry, destroy ourselves, and they don't ring! They do not need theater, so they do not need themselves! That's what I think, how about you? Who lied to them that this would save them from their deathly throes? And they march in their blindness, loving their ignorance, their withered chests, the insipid fluid running through their scrawny veins. Where to, humans? Where will this fragile complacency take you? (Melkonyan 1983:22).*

One interpretation of this monologue's beginning is that the human-like +VV 561 has acquired human qualities through play or more precisely, creative play and theater. That which Bernardie's world has rejected - the emotionally evocative art - has humanized the metal being. For example, art cannot save - in this the automatized people are right - humanity from death

(“deathly throes”), so they flee toward technology in search of something beyond themselves. Yet art remains perhaps the only way for a human to transcend the present and its state:

*You, Mr. Bernardie, use second-class robots. In the directive of social tiers, it says that robots of this class are only worthy of serving humans. To be sweepers, postmen, servants, cleaners of public facilities, not some kings, princesses, or nobles* (Melkonyan 1983: 29).

The humans (from Darlington) and Bernardie’s bio-robots blur the lines between what it means to be human and machine. The former wraps themselves in the cocoon of automatism and totalitarianism, as a kind of “iron shield” against the fragility of human existence and the potential disappointments housed by human consciousness, while the machines prefer imagination and art as paths to freedom. It turns out that it is precisely through imagination that humans can transcend the limitations of this given situation. Melkonyan’s texts are skeptical of the mechanization of the human being and instead offer an immersive experience in the world of imagination, art, and literature as paths to the only kind of freedom humanity can hope for.

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