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 ONE: INTRODUCTION

Anton Nikolov, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski
Assoc. Prof. Nadezhda Stoyanova, PhD (supervisor
Translated from Bulgarian by Velina Dimitrova

Today's discussion will focus mostly on the figure of Agop Melkonyan and some of his works, but before that, a few introductory words about science fiction in Bulgaria will be of use. The first works of science fiction in Bulgaria were published at the beginning of the 1930s, with, on the one hand, the novels of Georgi Iliev - *O-Kors* (1930) and *Teut in Revolt* (1933), and on the other hand, with Svetoslav Minkov's science fictional parodies and satires from the collections *Automata* (1932) and *The Lady with X-Ray Eyes* (1934) (for a similar genealogy, see Saparev 1983: 5-12). The appearance of the first works in this genre was not possible prior to the 1930s because, as Lyudmila Stoyanova points out:

Science fiction is a genre that owes its inception to the newly-formed industrial culture. (...) In the 1930s, industrial manufacturing, as an emblem of the new age and the accompanying positive spirit, took hold more forcefully in our country as well. The true beginning of Bulgarian science fiction dates from this period, if we do not count a short story by Ivan Vazov, apparently

written for a calendar occasion at the very end of 1899 – "The Last Day of the 20th Century" (Stoyanova 1996: 17).

Science fiction appears within the context of narrative scenes shifting from the rural to the urban. Fantastic literature in general, has a part to play in urbanizing the literary landscape; the diabolists of the first half of the 1920's already used the urban setting for their tales. However, although the conditions for the development of science fiction had appeared, the genre did not flourish for a long time. It remained characterized by a low output and as an undervalued choice even in terms of recreational prose until the socialist period, more specifically – the time between 1960 and 1989. The reasons for the extensive development of science fiction at that time are diverse and complex. One of the more important reasons is the need for a different kind of creative work distinct from that written in the style of socialist realism, and the genre provides writers with a means to distinguish their works from the literature associated with state-imposed directives. Another reason is the wave of translated science fiction narratives in those years - works by authors such as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke. What's more, fantastic literature presents an opportunity for creative achievements in a different aesthetic from that of literary realism, it gives more freedom for experimentation (see Stoyanova 1996: 27, 28). In a similar vein, it's important to note that alongside science fiction, dystopian narratives – often as a separate mode – also emerged in Bulgarian literature, providing a platform for critiques of totalitarianism. Naturally, the totalitarian regimes are either capitalist and Western, for example those in *Galactic Ballad* (1971) by Emil Manov and *The Judgment of Generations* (1978) by Lyubomir Nikolov and Georgi Georgiev, or are a kind of universal totalitarian regime, the real prototype of which is not made clear. Examples of dystopias of the second kind, which critique the totalitarian practices in communist Bulgaria can also be discerned in the works of Melkonyan. Two generations of writers of fantastic fiction can be delineated in these three decades; the firsts hosts the names of Lyuben Dilov, Pavel Vezhinov, Alexander Gerov, Emil Manov, Dimitar Angelov; and the second generation, which arose in the 1980's, is represented by writers such as Velko Miloev, Velichka Nastradinova, Tosho Lizhev, Petar Kardzhilov, Ivan Serafimov, Lyubomir Nikolov, Natalia Andreeva, Nikola Kesarovski. Agop Melkonyan, the key figure in our discussion, is typically placed amidst the ranks of this second generation, and it is to him that we can finally turn.

As the name suggests, Melkonyan is of Armenian origin. His father's side of the family came from the village of Mush in today's Turkey, from where they escaped the Armenian genocide in 1915, and in 1922 they settled permanently in Bulgaria, specifically in the city of Burgas. Agop Melkonyan himself was born in Burgas in 1949. From early on, his education and life were connected with science and technology; he graduated from the "Lenin" Technical School of Electrical Engineering in Plovdiv in 1964, receiving his diploma in 1968; after this he was admitted to the Higher Institute of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, known as "ВМЕИ" in Bulgarian or today's Technical University. His education focused on the railway transport operation and he graduated as a transportation engineer. He also completed a postgraduate degree in journalism at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". At first glance, this education, although prestigious in itself, does not convey the full versatility of this man's erudition. Melkonyan can be described as an encyclopedist, with the multi-directionality of his creative and other types of work supporting this characterization. His activities can be grouped as follows: poetry, dramaturgy, journalism, activities aimed at popularizing science, promotion and teaching of Armenian literature, translation, publishing and editorial activity.

Of his various creative and professional endeavors, I will mention only a few achievements to give a sense of the breadth of Melkonyan's thinking beyond the given descriptions, so that they are not left without some concrete examples. As an editor, he distinguished himself through his collaboration with smaller newspapers such as *The Technical Avanguard[1]* (1968–1974, as editor-in-chief), and later, with more reputable publications, particularly within Bulgaria's academic circles, such as the newspaper *Orbita*, where he worked from 1973 to 1991 for the *Nauka* (science) section. His editorial work as part of the editorial collective of *Galactica* library (1979) is particularly noteworthy. He was also a member of the editorial board of the magazine *FEP* between 1990 and 1991.

As a publisher, Melkonyan also had significant achievements. Along with his colleagues from *Orbita* he was one of the founders of the publishing house *Omega* and the science fiction

---

[1] Published by the Higher Institute of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, the first Bulgarian publication in color, known as the Student Newspaper.

magazine *Omega* in 1990. He is also the founder of the *Errato* publishing house, and in 1993, he released the *Small Library of Poetic Classics* series and opened a bookstore under the name *Errato* as well. Additionally, he was the publisher of *Werewolf* magazine (1997), which later became *Zone-F* and ran until 2002.

In the field of translation, the anthology *Armenian Lyric Poetry: IV–XX Century* (2001) is especially noteworthy. Melkonyan is considered one of the leading translators of Armenian poetry. It is also worth mentioning that he was the first lecturer in history of Armenian literature at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and one of the founders of the Armenian Philology program within the Department of Classical Studies at the Center for Eastern Languages and Cultures ("ЦИЕК" in Bulgarian) at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, where he taught from 1995 to 1999. Poetry was especially important for Melkonyan, and a high degree of lyricism is also evident in his prose. Among his personal poetic works, his final book, the posthumously published collection *...a territory untouched by shame* (2007), deserves special mention. In addition to poetry, he left a mark in dramaturgy as well. In 1990, he wrote the play *Fear Lives Within Us* (1990). Earlier, he had already dabbled in drama with the adaptation of his novella *My Poor Bernardie* (1983) into the play *My Poor Bernardie. An Anti-utopia* (2005). However, I must stress that these titles do not exhaust the scope of Melkonyan's dramatic and poetic works.

Yet, Melkonyan left his most significant mark, at least in terms of volume, in the fields of science and popular science journalism. It is absolutely impossible to list the hundreds of publications he's made, but I must mention three key books: *Are We Alone in the Universe?* (1982), whose title clearly speaks to its subject matter; *The Wisdom of the Heavens* (1983), a popular introduction to modern cosmology; and the more intriguing and somewhat unexpected, given the publications on cosmology - *Trains* (1985), the title again clearly indicating its content.

The works I will discuss here are part of the collections *Memory of the World* (1980), *Sinful and Sacred* (1983), and *Via Dolorosa* (1987). These collections gather nearly all of his fiction, containing the stories, novellas, and short stories later selected for two posthumous anthologies: *Up the Staircase towards God* (2009) and *Pathway to Beyond* (2019). Melkonyan undoubtedly favored shorter forms of fiction, with only one novel, *Death in the Conch* (1989),

which I will not explore here, though its fate is interesting: completed in 1989, it wasn't published until 1994, having been confiscated from the printers.

The avenues a researcher can take when exploring the works of Melkonyan are more than a few to say the least. His approach to science fiction is characterized by monologue-like, sometimes lyrical passages; his plots often slow down in favor of long episodes of reflection by the characters. Indeed, some analysts have argued that he writes a philosophical prose in the spirit of existentialism (see Tsankov 2008/14, 22). His characters are constantly troubled by death, the irreversibility of time, freedom, and, above all, the question that encompasses the rest: what does it really mean to be human? Here, however, I will try to introduce you to the way these topics are unraveled in Melkonyan's work through the image of the machine.

When machines are portrayed as characters, they may be sensible, and offer a different perspective on humanity from the point of view of someone detached. Melkonyan does not engage in forecasting the future of technology, at least not in terms of scientific accuracy; he is uninterested in how likely it is for a self-aware robot to be created or how it might be developed. Instead, he explores what this figure might reveal about humanity's aspirations toward such creations and what perspectives such beings might offer on their creators. Moreover, machines often reflect what their creators did not know or intend to instill in them but which nevertheless shines through their creations – such as the longing to transcend human limitations, or the self-perception of an autonomous being. In this sense, Melkonyan's stories, featuring machines as main characters, are also stories about their inventors and the outlines and boundaries of humanity.

The machine, however, plays another role in Melkonyan's texts: it can also be seen as an attempt to escape the possibility of suffering; that is, the machine not as a character but as a destination for humanity. This second category includes cases where Melkonyan's characters strive to become machines or machine-like themselves, in an attempt to escape the limitations of being human – primarily, death, or more precisely, the suffering of the mind conscious of death. These are the two perspectives through which I will present some of his more famous works - two perspectives that, as we shall see in part two of this discussion, often intersect in the separate texts.