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THE TIME OF THE AUTHOR

The Author's Stratagem

A case study in Armenia

Anne Provoost

Is the time of the author in sync with that of the world in which he works?

The writer Anna P. has bought herself a smart phone. Not to call much, she knows, but because a fellow poet showed her the 'Notes' application. 'Notes', he explained, is a virtual notebook that syncs your phone with your laptop. No more hassle with Moleskine pads, scribbled beer mats, scrawled napkins or other ephemeral writing surfaces; the canary-yellow app sends your good ideas straight to your workstation. An appealing gadget for a writer, even though for Anna it was more the buzzword itself that drove her to make the purchase. Her friend the poet had used the verb 'sync', a lot more beautiful than the ethereal 'put it in the cloud' that everyone uses nowadays. Syncing made her think of physics, of a laboratory, of weight. It conjured an image of words overheating, melting the test vessel and trickling through the floor into the earth until they hit the bedrock, where they remain, lined up in a row, like well-turned phrases and unforgettable

verses, and where the seeping of minerals over the years makes them hard, durable and substantial as stone.

Anna travels to Armenia to write about the ‘forgotten genocide’. In her homeland Belgium commemorations of the start of the First World War are under way. On the other side of Europe an anniversary is approaching that should not be forgotten either. A million Armenians were murdered there in 1915. In planning her writing project Anna is already making herself liable. The Turkish authorities still refuse to recognize the ethnic eradication as a genocide. A crime that comes up against revisionism produces festering wounds. She will have to approach her subject cautiously, and listen to a range of voices, not only those of writers and intellectuals. She readies herself for continuous note-taking, even on buses and in cafés. She is relying on her new phone to help her.

On the plane a little old lady bent in half sits down next to her. She looks ancient. Her thin white hair rests on her head like a bright crown; her cheeks seem to be made of precious crackle; the wrinkles around her eyes extend all the way to her ears. Hardly has she sat down than she has struck up a conversation with Anna. Her name is Aghavni, she says, which in Armenian means ‘Dove’. She is from Nor Kharberd, an Armenian city annexed by the Ottomans and now on Turkish soil. She spent her childhood in Lebanon in a home for expelled Armenian children after being separated from her mother and brother in a raid. For eight years she waited to be picked up by one of her relatives. One day her brother, now a young man, stood at the door of the home. Contrary to what Dove thought, he had not been killed but was saved by a Turk. The latter had given a boatman on

the Euphrates a gold coin to bring the boy safely to the other shore. Her brother had then wandered for eight years. He was here now to pick her up. But Dove did not go with him. She was twelve. She had been in the home since the age of four. She did not recognize the young man, and refused to embrace him. The woman director of the home became suspicious and sent him away. That day Dove missed an opportunity to be reunited with her mother. Throughout the long years that followed in Lebanon she was not unhappy, however. She knew her mother was alive, and that a Turk had saved her brother.

As the woman outlines the rest of her life, with all the complications and details that fill a person's existence, it becomes clear to Anna that Dove is not who she claims to be. She is not a little old Armenian woman who grew up in Lebanon, squandered the opportunity to be reunited with her mother, and rejoiced when she heard that the enemy had saved her brother. She is Time. Time adds nuance, but does not play down events. Time seeks to provide meaning. Time knows that everyone has his own version of the facts. For Time, every story is equally important. Time realizes that some events from the past will be remembered, others not. Sometimes what is relevant is forgotten, and one keeps recounting what is of no significance. Time has no preference. What people repeat and what they keep quiet is arbitrary. Time hopes that sooner or later the lies will come to light, but Time is not naive. Time knows that falsehoods also live on. Sometimes Time herself keeps silent about certain matters. One only needs to look at her face to know that there are events she does not wish to discuss. Perhaps one day she will talk about them, but not yet. Time can wait. Time is patient.

Time has all the time in the world.

Anna tells Time she plans to visit the genocide museum. O, very well, says Time, it is all about my time! The museum tells many stories. They are all sad, really very sad. And there are still people who claim they are lies. In Turkey especially. People there say we exaggerate. But surely everyone knows what an exaggeration is. An exaggeration is truth that has lost patience. I have come to write about precisely that, says Anna. How are you going to do that, asks Time? You are not from here and you did not live through it. I am going to try to imagine it, Anna answers. Do you think you can, asks Time. I do not know whether I will manage, says Anna, but I want to try. That is good, answers Time, that is the only thing we can still do now. Talking about it, identifying and articulating everything, giving the deceased a name ... Yes, answers Anna. Naming and putting into words, that is important, that is what I am going to try to do. She picks up her phone and types 'NAME'.

At the airport Anna finds a bus that takes her straight to the genocide museum. It comprises a modernist building and a monument made of concrete arches above an eternal flame. Inside the building, large showcases display the proof of a targeted genocide. Anna listens to the guide, reads the captions and looks at the photographs. She is reminded of Dove and is overcome with shame. She is ashamed because she knew so little about this, ashamed because it did happen, ashamed because she knows it will happen again in the future. She suddenly has the impression she knows what she needs to do. She takes out her phone and types 'SHAME'. She is ready to elaborate. She wants to add that shame is a very

powerful force that can prevent history repeating itself and that it convinces people that such a thing must happen 'never again'. She wants to write down that shame distinguishes us from animals, that it is related to guilt... But she doesn't get around to it. The yellow screen catches her eye and she is surprised. Set so close to one another, 'NAME' and 'SHAME' do not sound half as elaborate as she intended when she wrote them down. 'Name and shame', isn't that the catchword for what is so often done online nowadays? Did she come all the way here for this purpose? To shamefully do no more than this: to feel her dismay rise within her, to write it down and share it with others? To show that it was not her fault, that she was on the right side all along, that she cannot be blamed for anything? She suddenly feels the need for fresh air. Without even glancing at the books she runs through the bookshop and hurries outside.

As the visitors exit the museum, they are steered towards the memorial under the concrete arches. The fire burns despite the strong wind. This eternal flame, Anna types into her phone, is an apt metaphor for what a written text can signify for a genocide: words are used to lend everlasting value to the endured suffering; they depict *wie es wirklich gewesen ist*, and offer readers the possibility to relate with the victims. Literary texts that do not tackle solidarity are namely about nothing. By letting the voices of the past resonate... *blah blah blah*. Anna stops typing. Marching music resounds from the boxes behind her. People around her take pictures. Some lay down white carnations. Others pray... Anna can think no further. What is she to do with her indignation? What is it good for? Indignation leads to self-righteousness. It tends to end in whining. She

has to take a seat. She sits down on the bench and deletes everything she has written and types 'LAME'.

A young man suddenly sits down next to her. He seems cheerful and is dressed fashionably. He has a phone like Anna's. Try this shortcut, he says helpfully. You can use it to erase an entire note in a single stroke. No need to delete one letter at a time. Anna thanks him for the tip and they start talking. His name is Tarverdyan. He is a website developer, but he began his career as an actor. When he was seventeen he was called up for two years. Luckily he could play the cello and through a colonel friend of his father's he was able to join the president's orchestra. The orchestra accompanied stage performances. On one occasion an actor fell sick and Tarverdyan was asked to replace him. This is how he became an actor at an early age. He later appeared on public television. He now has a young family. He shows Anna photographs on his phone of his newly born daughter, his three-year-old son and his wife. They are modern, urban people, the kind you see everywhere in Europe.

The conversation between Anna and Tarverdyan will continue for the rest of her stay in Armenia. They talk about everything: the genocide, the Turks, their families, customs in Armenia and in Belgium. The more they get to know one another, the more outspoken he becomes. He elaborates on his relations with women and his married life. In the beginning Anna is interested. She finds she gets a valuable insight into the life of a young Armenian family. But pretty soon his tone starts to bother her. What he says seems unrelated to what she sees in the city of Yerevan. He tells her

how as a young actor he seduced actresses backstage. Per definition he went for the older women because young women were too risky for a boy of his age. Deflowering a girl as old as himself could have led to blackmail. If the girl claimed he had raped her, he would have been forced to marry her. With older women you are safe. If they accuse you of having debauched them, they only make themselves ridiculous. Virginity is a precious asset in Armenia. That has everything to do with the genocide. The Turks raped a lot of women at the time. Since then men have learned to be careful. You do not want to raise the child of the enemy, do you? Before dating a particular girl a man will always check her reputation. Facebook can be of a great help in this. On Facebook you can see what friends you have in common. You can call them up and talk. Men help one another in this; they will not lie about a girl's virginity, not even if it is their cousin or their neighbour. Women will, however; you have to beware of Armenian women. They lie to cover one another. Women in Armenia are free. His own wife, for instance, can sleep with another man if she wants. But if she chooses to do so, she will have to suffer the consequences. She will lose everything, including the house and the children; that is something she is very much aware of. The same holds for his own offspring. His son will be raised freely, but he will have to answer for his choices. If he decides to become gay, he will no longer be allowed to call himself his child ...

It takes a while for Anna to realize that Tarverdyan is not the person he pretends to be. He is not a website developer who plays the cello, began a career in the theatre at a young age, and is now the father of two little children. He is Time. He is another Time than Dove, but still he is Time.

This Time has possibilities. This Time feels free. This Time has the impression that the future is wide open. For this Time nothing is excluded. It can still happen that girls are examined to the depths of their soul. It can still happen that a woman is rejected because she is no longer a virgin. It can still happen that a father disowns his son because he is gay. This Time is *le temps perdu* of the future, the predictable lost time. This Time stamps his feet in place, trips over himself. This Time is all the bits of history out of which no lessons were drawn.

This Time inspires Anna. She conceives a plan, a cunning scheme, a 'stratagem'. She asks this Time whether she can write about him. Of course, he says, go ahead. Even if you know that I do not agree with you at all, asks Anna, and people in my country will condemn your beliefs? All the more reason, he answers, then people will hear my arguments. By putting arguments down on paper you make them respectable. The more people hear about this, the better. Write it all down and publish it. Step into the circle you cannot leave: what you record will automatically become big and important. Everything you jot down about Armenian men proves our point, even the negative things. You think you can write about our morals, but in fact you are only bringing up the genocide. We suffered evil, and that has influenced our ways. Our attitude is a reaction to the past that bled us.

Anna thinks of Dove. She thinks of her patience, her compassion. And she suddenly comes to the conclusion that writing is 'syncing'. You set one time against the other, and by this action you do the reader a service. You prevent that times which belong to the past – because they are disgraceful, because they are retrograde, because they are shameful –

continue in the future. You set up beacons, locks and check valves to stop the past from flowing back. You prevent acquired insight from getting lost again. You give catching-up Time the chance to keep up. Anna sees it clearly before her: she is going to write a text about how a genocide is being denied, about how it consequently resonates in time, and how – at the end of the line – it is explained by some, and perverted by others. She thereby hopes to voice both Dove's and Tarverdyan's concerns.

But of course things unfold differently. On the last day of her stay in Armenia, Tarverdyan brings Anna to the airport. Before she checks in, he has one more question for her. He wants to know whether it feels good. What do you mean, she asks. That feeling of superiority, he says, does it warm you? I do not know what you mean, answers Anna. I am asking whether you take pleasure in shaping your aversion to a man like me, he says. Making it clear to your readers that you are more 'decent' than me. Teaching me a lesson. I have told you what I feel, answers Anna. You invoke a century-old repression today to behave like a swanker. I know your tune, he answers, you have made it sufficiently clear by now. But does it occur to you that I wanted to confront you? What do you mean, asks Anna. Suppose I had been a Westerner, he says. Then you would have seen me as an exception. The idea of writing about me would in that case never have entered your mind. But I am a man from Armenia. Because I live in Armenia, and not in Western Europe, you do not give me the benefit of the doubt. You write, not to talk about *me*, but about my country. Have you ever paused to consider that madmen also roam this place, just like yours? Anna looks at him. Nothing of what had been said earlier has prepared her

for this turn of events. Do you mean, she asks, ... But that is all she manages to say. I told you I was an actor, he says. Thanks to the army, you remember? I was seventeen and I played the cello? Anna looks away, then back at him. She realizes she has been fooled. She understands that he has been lecturing her instead of the other way around. In her mind a view is adjusted, an insight gained. She sees now how relative her moral supremacy is, and she realizes she is synced in turn.

What she will bring up only much later, in the company of a group of understanding writers, is her stratagem. It is a tested tactic. She chose the narrative point of view of the fallible observer. She humiliated herself, lowered her defences, but in a well considered gesture. She changed the truth. Tarverdyan did not take her to the airport. The conversation at the check-in never took place. He did not confront her with her prejudice against Armenian men. The entire farewell was made up. She added the scene to take herself down. It is a scheme she imposed upon herself, one of the detours writers happen to make. She would rather point out the beam in her own eye than be suspected of feelings of superiority. The writer is not without guilt – no one is ever without guilt – and from that premise she names and shames, and hopes no one will notice that she is on her high horse again. Her humble, falsely modest squat enables her to express what she has to say: it is not because a writer can imagine a well defined Time that s/he will also let it happen unhindered.

Translated from the Dutch by Patrick Lennon