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SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT (By popular demand)
Dickran Kouymjian on Saroyan

LETTER FROM PARIS

Passage of the Great: Friends & Restaurants That Got Away

Saroyan and I used to have terrific meals together in Paris. Now he's gone, as are most of our favorite eating spots. And almost nothing makes me sadder...

by PHIL ADELPHUS

A FEW DAYS ago on a blustery, cold morning, I watched two craftsmen affix to a wall at 74, rue Taitbout a small marble plaque inscribed:

William Saroyan (1908-1981) Ecrivain américain d'origine arménienne a habité cet immeuble de 1960 à 1981

Thus, the passage of the great Armenian-American writer was immortalized with the minimum of formality, something he would have appreciated, for he eschewed honors and titles. Fortunately, I was not a lone witness to this ceremony. Dickran Kouymjian, the peripatetic professor of Armenian studies at Fresno State University in California (who commutes from Paris) was present and took pictures, and Elie Pressmann, the gifted avant-garde French playwright took care of the arrangements on behalf of the William Saroyan Foundation.

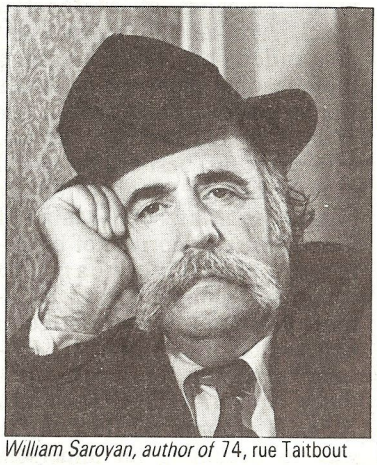
In an earlier column, I described succinctly, to say the least, Bill Saroyan's strange cohabitation with Paris. With his typical swift decisiveness he had chosen to purchase the first apartment he visited – a sixth-floor walkup without heat ! – and complained about it for 20 years. Yet he made the apartment "work" (to use his word) in the sense that he did a batch of writing there, including a book which immortalized the place : *Letters from 74, rue Taitbout.* Bill wanted his foundation to make the apartment available to young American writers, but let's face it, this did not make practical sense. So the Foundation sold the flat to the insurance company that had gradually bought up the rest of the building, rendering it an incongruous place to live in for anyone, not to speak of a writer.

Now, to kill two birds with one stone, I have always been threatening the editors of this magazine to write a column called "My Favorite Dead Restaurants." It dawns on me that Saroyan would be a fitting nexus for that story, since I frequented several of the places with him during the Sixties and Seventies.

Nothing (all right, few things) can make me sadder than to discover that a favorite eating place has gone the way of all flesh. One day you turn up at the door and a sign says: "Out of business." One of the restaurants that I discovered through William Saroyan – and fittingly an Armenian eating place – was the Yar, located on a little street, rue Marbeuf just off the Champs-Elysées. It was not only a spacious place, but offered the best Armenien food in Paris. There was a charcoal grill opposite where we sat and in another room a fantastic table of *hors d'œuvres,* which one selected oneself. The founder, a Russo-Armenian, had died before I discovered the place, but his widow, a sad-looking quiet Armenian lady and her tall daughter ran the restaurant with quiet efficiency. And needless to say, there was a full array of refugee waiters, one of whom was, of course, cross-eyed.

I say "of course" because I discovered that every Armenian restaurant worth its salt has one cross-eyed waiter. This is a universal rule.

Another favorite place (although not fully dead) which I frequented with Saroyan was the Diamantaires on rue Lafayette. As this was not far from Bill's apartment, we often went there



William Saroyan, author of 74, rue Taitbout

together. He called it "Aram's place," for its half-owner was Aram Pechdimaldjian. My favorite dish there was "Plaki," a delicious concoction of white beans, carrots and tomatoes, a peasant dish which, sadly, is rarely to be found in any Armenian restaurant. When Aram died, the restaurant lost its charm for me, but fortunately his widow runs a delicatessen right next door called Raffi. There is a sister store on avenue Paul Doumer where one can find delicious Armenian delicacies.

Another favorite place of ours was the Sirdar Grill on the Champs-Elysées, near the rue du Colisée. The restaurant was located on the second floor *(premier étage pour les français).* While the food was not extraordinary, I liked the relaxed ambiance, and the steak tartare was remarkable. It was at the Sirdar that Bill and I met John Hess, then the *New York Times* feature writer in Paris, who became a great friend of both of us. It turned out that John's wife Karen, an American, was one of the best cooks in Paris and Bill and I were often privileged to dine at their apartment on avenue Hoche. The Sirdar went out of business about ten years ago. I'll never forget the Sirdar for another reason: it was there that I learned of President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. I saw Saroyan the next morning and although he detested politicians, he was clearly shaken up by the snuffing out of a young life.

Another now dead restaurant that Saroyan and I frequented was Luigi's Bar, around the corner on rue du Colisée. It was such a landmark that I never dreamed it would stop, let alone give way to a Chinese restaurant, as though we needed another one in Paris. Luigi's Bar was a great place to hang out, and the restaurant, while small, never served bad food. During the Sixties, when the Algerian war was going on, a passing motorcyclist dropped a hand grenade in Luigi's place. The owner, whose name was, of course, not Luigi, did not talk much about this *attentat,* but did it jinx the place? I don't know, but why in the world did he sell out to a Chinese restaurant?

To stay in the neighborhood, another dead restaurant I'll mention was the Florence, on rue de Ponthieu in the eighth arrondissement. I considered it the best Italian restaurant in Paris. Its owner was a real Italian, a Florentine, and again it was a terrific jolt when I discovered that the Florence was no more. Now the Lamazère is there, a good place to eat *foie gras,* but I can't go there without a tinge of sadness for the good old days when Saroyan and I would delect a delicious plate of *cannelloni.*

Finally, the best dead restaurant that I frequented with Saroyan was Chez Garin on the Left Bank, not far from Notre Dame. In the Sixties, it had already earned two stars in the Michelin. The *sole soufflé* was an extraordinary dish featuring a mysterious pink sauce with an ineffable taste. Alas, Mr. Garin got fed up with the difficulty of maintaining high standards in Paris and closed his place down. The last I heard, he was operating somewhere near Toulon.

One expects great restaurants to go on forever but like great men and the non-great, they die too. ■

The Mirror Of Books

Saroyan Won A Life-long Bet Between Himself And The World

SAROYAN: A BIOGRAPHY by Lawrence Lee and Barry Gifford; Harper & Row; 338 pages with chronology, bibliography, and index; $17.95.

By Dr. Dickran Kouymjian

SAROYAN

Here is a very public book about a very private man. Larry Lee and Barry Gifford have once again successfully dramatized the life of a major American writer through the words of his family, friends, and associates. Their first collaborative venture in this genre, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (St. Martin's Press, 1978), was a fast-paced, earnest work which consciously tried to explain Kerouac's writing and its importance to those who lived the so-called "Beat Generation." That book also attempted to assess the value of Kerouac's art to a new generation. After Saroyan's death in 1981, the San Francisco team set out to do something similar around the equally legendary California Armenian writer.

For those who have grown up as admirers of Saroyan's special ability to vividly chronicle America's everyman, this relentless and at times gossipy book may anger as it intrigues. To a younger generation, one not used to reading Saroyan, the book will be an adventure into the world of Broadway and New York publishing during the fabulous decades of the 1930's, 40's and 50's. It will also appeal instantly to that same audience which was enthralled by the confess-and-fight-back books about Saroyan from the pen of his sometimes estranged son, Aram. Like Aram's *Last Rites: The Death of William Saroyan* (William Marrow, 1982) and even his *William Saroyan* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), this book is concerned more with the pseudo-, at times genuine, psychoanalysis of a major figure of American letters, than with a serious endeavour to understand Saroyan as a writer or to evaluate his literary achievement. Herein lies the great difference between the Kerouac book and the one at hand.

Once picked up, only the most disciplined reader will be able to stop to take a sensible breath before racing on. One reason is the story does not begin at the beginning in Fresno in 1908, but in New York and San Francisco in 1940 when William Saroyan is arguably the most renowned writer in the United States. Undaunted Saroyan fans should begin the book with the section entitled "The Time of Your Life" (p. 226), savoring the warm and flattering testimony of Lillian Gish and Eddie Dowling, before starting at the beginning.

Why have the biographers started in a "middle" of their own choosing? And why in the first section of the book, more than half the story, is there so little on Saroyan's recognized genius? On the eve of World War II, it was Bill Saroyan of Fresno, California who could so quickly capture the everyday speech of everyday people and elevate it to some of the most noble humanistic accounts of man's search for the meaning of life.

The question is hard to answer, especially for this reviewer whose modest aid is so generously acknowledged by the authors. To me, whether consciously or not, Lee and Gifford display no empathy toward the subject of their research. Rarely does one find lyrical phrases about Saroyan like those which are common in the Kerouac book. Kerouac too had, in his own way, a lonely, often solitary life like that attributed to Saroyan and like him was often misunderstood and re-

Continued on page 12

Saroyan

Continued from page 3

jected by the literary establishment.

In fact the first part of the book seems to be less about Saroyan than his former wife, Carol Marcus Saroyan Matthau, for whom the authors certainly show sympathy. If Aram Saroyan had his chance to work out his personal problems through the writing of a psychodrama about his father, it seems that our writers have provided Saroyan's twice divorced wife the means to work out publicly her own psychic cleansing. William Saroyan was the culprit. While busily writing some of the most unusual plays othe 20th century and surely some of the most widely read novels and stories, it seems he was damaging the lives of his wife and at least one of his children. Additionally, we get the impression from the book he was so insufferable, the authors had a hard time finding people who would say kind words about him. There are some affectionate glimpses in the book, especially near the end from his daughter Lucy, but they are so few they almost underline the opposite emotion.

It is unfortunate that in this finely crafted book, containing an abundance of information unavailable elsewhere, some serious, often unsubstantiated, charges are made against Saroyan. The book jacket even revels in making this point: "...Artie Shaw, Budd Schulberg, Celeste Holm, Irwin Shaw, Julie Haydon, and Lillian Gish. All of them speak here in their own voices, and their revelations of compulsive gambling, anti-Semitism and paralyzing jealousy bring new darkness and depth to the saga of the brash young man in the cocked fedora who won everything, only to lose it all."

This is hardly an attitude designed to endear us to one of the most loved of American writers. If Saroyan were alive he would sue for libel, I suppose. For example, the charge of anti-Semitism is gratuitous. No where in the book is it proved or even convincingly described. Carol Matthau has said that Bill Saroyan left her when after six years of marriage he finally found out she was Jewish. Their son Aram had said it already. Yet the credulity of those who knew Saroyan well, even his Armenian cronies, is stretched to the breaking point. However much Saroyan's Uncle Aram of Santa Barbara may have made anti-Semitic remarks in the 1920s, Saroyan's lifelong Jewish friends and acquaintances from Broadway and Hollywood never talked about it and even in these pages do not. To imagine that Saroyan, who all of his life had an almost irritating obsession to know the origin of every name he came across - and he wrote about these things time and again in stories published long before he met Mrs. Saroyan - not to know that a girl from New York named Marcus with a mother named Rosheen was not Jewish is just absurd. Saroyan left Carol Marcus because, as he himself told us in his post-divorce fiction and memoires, he suspected her of lying and infidelity. On this point Lee and Gifford have probably uncovered more than they have revealed.

Let's take another example: how is the intelligent reader to explain this book's attitude toward Saroyan's military career and his wartime novel *The Adventures of Wesley Jackson?* During his entire life William Saroyan was vehemently against violence and war. He made that known openly even to his superiors in the army. He was certainly what we would call today a conscientious objector and yet the word or its suggestion is never once found in the book. Wesley Jackson is an anti-war novel, pure and simple, and the first one published on World War II. Of course it was unpopular with the establishment, that is precisely why thinking persons should appreciate its gutsy boldness as well as its humor.

Indeed, this is the main problem in an often challenging reassessment of the Pulitzer prize winning writer. The authors fail to see, or refuse to acknowledge, that Saroyan was always against the system, any organized institution, whether the army, school, Hollywood, the publishing world, Broadway, especially when they deprived people of their individuality. He gambled all his life and lost most of the time, but he won a life-long bet between himself and the world: William Saroyan would succeed in the system, while criticizing it, attacking it, telling it where to get off, mocking it, and finally walking away from it and still surviving it.

The end of this fascinating literary construction tries very hard to be more understanding to Saroyan and even partially succeeds. The price that we as readers must pay is to envisage him as a solitary, lonely, pathetic and mean figure in need of our sympathy. That ending is the same one that Aram Saroyan chose to use, and, indeed, Lee and Gifford quote in extenso from *Last Rites.*

Those who were close to William Saroyan in the last years know that he died at his pace in his time, a man who lived privately by choice, but was always full of public bravado, a man who had thought more about the human condition than most figures of our time and had furthermore written it all down, a human being who in regularly revealing to us in clear and at times brutal terms his own defficiencies, died an integral and whole person with no need for hysterical psychodrama to explain his personality to the rest of us.

Kouymjian as Director of Armenian Studies at CSU Fresno teaches a series of courses on Saroyan. The above review first appeared in the San Diego Union.

SAROYAN

A BIOGRAPHY

LAWRENCE LEE
AND
BARRY GIFFORD

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK
CAMBRIDGE, PHILADELPHIA, SAN FRANCISCO, LONDON,
MEXICO CITY, SÃO PAULO, SINGAPORE, SYDNEY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, our thanks must go to the members of William Saroyan's family who agreed to speak with us for this book, especially his former wife, Carol Matthau, his son, Aram Saroyan, and his daughter, Lucy Saroyan. While engaged in completing his own study, *William Saroyan*, Aram Saroyan generously acted as ambassador and explainer to his family on our behalf and also was kind enough to share the family's photograph collection, which helps to enrich this volume. Going over the ground covered in our questions cannot have been a pleasant task for these most important of our witnesses, and our obligation to them is enormous.

It should be emphasized that no one, including the close family members, was granted the right to delete material from our manuscript, except in the case of their own directly quoted remarks. We appreciate this ratification of our journalistic and literary independence.

Next, our thanks to those for whom the study of William Saroyan has been a task of many years, persons to whom we must certainly have appeared to be ill-informed newcomers. Dickran Kouymjian of California State University, Fresno, offered a unique perspective to us, not only as a scholar of Armenian art, history, and current affairs, but as Saroyan's friend and colleague in Paris as well as America. His insights and advice at the very beginning of our journey were especially helpful, as were those of his fellow Fresno scholar David Battan, who generously shared information and materials gathered for his own forthcoming work on the same subject. In Fresno, Aram and Alma

Also, my Grandmother Lucy died at the age of eighty-eight, and this is what she said at the end: *"Ul chem grnar."*
Isn't that beautiful? *"Can't hang on."*

He returned to Fresno each year at the time of the grape harvest, although the vineyard was gone now from across the street from his twin tract houses on West Griffith Way. To one of the surrogates, such as the novelist Herbert Gold, Saroyan would explain that he kept the extra house in case his son or daughter decided to visit him, the implication being that such a prospect was unthinkable on their part, not his. In fact, both houses were filled with the documentation of the life of Saroyan. His workplace was a simple white table in a big room with multiple towers of paper. He had begun to keep copies of his correspondence after a pleading letter from the Library of Congress and the affair of Aram's dealings with UCLA had established its value in his mind. The detailed evidence of his life was here, in these two private places where even Archie could be turned away at the door without a word. The cousin who had been as close as a brother learned to read Saroyan's answering face, to say quickly, "I'll see you later, Bill," and to hear Saroyan say, "Thanks, Arch," as Archie headed back for his car and the three-hour drive to Palo Alto. Only a few old friends would receive visits or have their invitations answered, and because his worsening hearing made the telephone something of an ordeal, Saroyan would bark even at a call from his brother, Henry. The phone number was unlisted, to the uninitiated, because he wished to avoid direct calls from agents or from students working on term papers. To the children of his neighborhood, to the denizens of the library and the regular customers of a nearby shopping mall that he favored, he was the old man with the white mustache who rode a bicycle. On page 88 of the Fresno telephone directory he was "Aram Garoghlanian, 2729 W. Griffith Wy.....227-4765."

He made friends with another young surrogate son, another Dickran Kouymjian, who had been born in Eastern Europe of Armenian-American parents from Chicago, and who now directed the Armenian Studies concentration at Fresno State University. Kouymjian is a scholar of wide-ranging skills whose particular specialty is iconography. Not only was he fluent in Armenian, capable of understanding clearly Saroyan's Bitlisi dialect, but, Saroyan was surprised to discover, Kouymjian also split his time between Fresno and Paris, where his wife kept their

apartment. Kouymjian returned to California for the fall term at the university just as Saroyan was returning from his own Paris home.

For the last dozen years of his life, Saroyan confided in Kouymjian and found the confidences kept. He discussed his unhappiness with his children, as he did with all the surrogate sons, and he spoke of what he considered to be Carol's betrayal, although journal entries Kouymjian was permitted to read described in unembarrassed detail the physical delight Bill had found in his lovemaking with her. Kouymjian and another young man, David Battan, a local scholar and collector of Saroyan's works, were his ideal readers. There was the young Armenian, Kouymjian, who acknowledged Saroyan's mastery of the broad sweep of matters Armenian, even if he could be faulted on the fine details, and who could laugh with delight at the mixture of satire and respect in the character sketches of the *Haratch* play. In the young non-Armenian, Battan, there was a sympathetic and eager expert on Saroyaniana who completely shared, in a more objective fashion, Saroyan's mystification over the eclipse of his reputation. Battan was permitted to read exactly what Saroyan wanted everyone else to be able to read, unpublished works in the old style, such as *Another Aram*, a volume that would complete and continue the sequence of stories only partially collected in *My Name Is Aram*, and which Saroyan intended to be illustrated by more of Don Freeman's wonderful drawings.

To any invitation to appear on a platform at a dinner or semipublic event, Saroyan's answer was an automatic no, although he found it necessary and appropriate to attend an appearance of a delegation of writers from Soviet Armenia at the Fresno Convention Center, insisting on sitting in the audience. If asked by old friends such as Aram and Alma Arax, Saroyan was willing to attend a dinner, but only after trimming the guest list to suit himself and making it plain that the floor was to remain his throughout the evening.

On a day that Professor Kouymjian was in the process of moving his office at the university, one of the five students he had recruited to assist him answered the office telephone. A moment later, obviously excited, he handed it to the teacher: "It's William Saroyan, Doc!" All five of the young men had grown up in Fresno's Armenian-American community and now had moved into formal study of their ancestry, and without even having glimpsed the archetypal Armenian, Saroyan.

"Can I bring these five wild Armenian kids over?" Kouymjian asked.

"Bring 'em over!" Saroyan shouted into the phone, and the professor used the prospect of the meeting to make the work go quickly.

> DICKRAN KOUYMJIAN: Five students, and he went around the table asking their names, spelling them. Went around the table trying to figure out their genealogy. "Aren't you such-and-such's nephew?" He was a walking encyclopedia on cousins, relationships, family ties, even though he didn't mix that much with the general public. He was asking questions to get that knowledge as quickly as possible, question after question.
>
> What did he want to know?
>
> Everything. Everything. He wanted to know about . . . everything. What do I mean by everything? What were these kids doing? Why did they want to do *that*? What did their parents think about what they were doing? How they felt about Armenian things . . .

Despite his complete grasp of spoken Armenian, Saroyan remained ignorant of the written language until the very end, and so it was Kouymjian who brought him the news written only in that language, pamphlets from the Beirut militants who believed in avenging the genocide. "Far from expressing any moral condemnation of it—I don't want to suggest that he was for it—he just wanted to know everything about it," says Kouymjian, "and he grew excited by the idea that there was a commitment on the part of these young people who should have been assimilated out by the third or fourth generation, all of a sudden feeling that they should be more aggressive in bringing up the old question that has never been resolved, the unpunished genocide and the loss of the land because of that genocide."

In 1977, perhaps becoming aware of the illness that would eventually claim him, but otherwise in sound health in the eyes of his few close acquaintances, Saroyan began a final thematic memoir. As a trivial interview and the summer visit of his children had provided the framework for *Not Dying*, and as a list of all his addresses had given structure to *Places Where I've Done Time*, Saroyan now began to free-associate in writing as he pondered *Variety*'s necrology register for the year 1976, the show-business newspaper's listing of everyone who had died that year in the entertainment industry.

In 135 chapters, he writes about his personal experiences with a

WILLIAM SAROYAN

by ARAM SAROYAN

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers San Diego · New York · London

Acknowledgments

various phases of this project, from Armen Bagdasarian, Bruce Fisher, M.D., Dickran Kouymjian, Archie Minasian, Rosheen Marcus, Frank and Roxie Moradian, Stuart A. Robbins, Manuel J. Tolegian, Sanford Ungar, John Woods, and Andrew Wylie. Howard R. Floan's study, *William Saroyan* (New York: Twayne, 1966), repeatedly proved to be an invaluable resource.

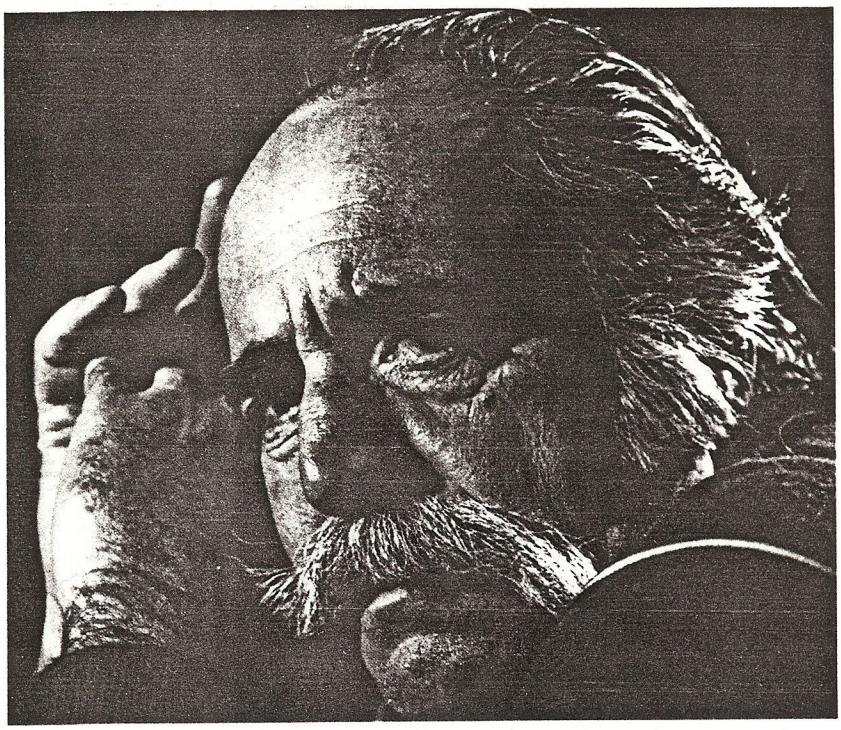
A. S.

Saroyan at his will signing on October 21, 1980, in Fresno. His witnesses are (standing, from left) *Dr. Harold Haack, president of California State University at Fresno; Dickran Kouymjian, coordinator of the Armenian Studies Program at CSUF; Richard Harrington, Saroyan's lawyer at the time;* (seated, from left) *Leon Peters, chairman of the Ad Hoc Steering Committee of the Armenian National Museum; and Marvin Baxter, lawyer for the Armenian National Museum and Cultural Center.* (Dickran Kouymjian Photo Archive, Paris—Fresno.)

Saroyan's Paris apartment at 74 Rue Taitbout. (Dickran Kouymjian Photo Archive, Paris—Fresno.)

WILLIAM Saroyan

My Real Work Is Being



DAVID STEPHEN CALONNE

Foreword by Dickran Kouymjian

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped me in the gestation of this work over the past four years. Jerome Bump first encouraged me to write a study of Saroyan and helped immeasurably at every step. Alan Friedman, Anthony Hilfer, Christopher Middleton, and David Wevill have all offered penetrating comments and ideas. Gloria Gannaway read and discussed these pages with me, offering wonderful insights from the beginning. Dickran Kouymjian read the manuscript for the University of North Carolina Press and has generously shared his massive knowledge of Saroyan as writer and man with me. My brother, Ariel Calonne, has always been a stimulating interlocutor, and we have had many happy philosophical talks. To my parents, Pierre and Mariam Calonne, and my late grandparents, Vagharshak and Flora Galoostian, I owe a deep debt of gratitude, because it is their enthusiasm and love for literature, for art, for music, for beauty, which made this book possible.

I also thank the staffs of the Fresno County Free Library, the library of California State University at Fresno, and the Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas, for assisting me in my work. And, finally, to the used and rare-book shops of San Francisco, Fresno, and Austin—many thanks for your help in finding books for me.

"In spare, elegant prose, singularly free of excessive adulation or sentimentality, Calonne has given us a meditation on Saroyan firmly anchored in the works themselves. With this study, proper assessment of Saroyan's literary worth can be said to have begun. The book's adroit and convincing philosophical framework should serve as a catalyst for new studies on particular facets of Saroyan's writing. Henceforth, it will be difficult to discuss Saroyan without reference to this work."
—Dickran Kouymjian, from the Foreword

The University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill and London

Foreword

DICKRAN KOUYMJIAN

William Saroyan (31 August 1908–18 May 1981) has had less sustained critical attention than any other major American writer of the century. Why? Despite his early bravado and the conspicuous handlebar mustache of later years, he was a private man, "an introvert with the good sense to act like an extrovert." He was unpredictable both in punctuality and attitude when it came to interviews, as one of the leitmotivs of his autobiographical interlude, *Not Dying*, so humorously describes. He never encouraged a Saroyan cult. Artificial publicity was the kind of fraudulence he could not abide, hence his disdain for press agents, media personalities, producers, promoters, and the "gang" of parasites who were secondary to the actual creation of a work of art.

Saroyan's disinterest in media success probably explains in part his casual attitude even toward those who wished to promote him properly. He was not optimistic that critics would penetrate his meanings. For him the writing itself, together with his frequent explanations of it, should have been sufficient. Reviewers too often failed to understand both the formal structure of his works, especially the plays, and their wondrous nature. The introduction to his improvisatory play *Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All or the London Comedy* is characteristic of this state of affairs. It contains a "Letter to Fifteen Drama Critics," all of whom panned the premiere production in 1960: "I say Sam is a good play. I am sorry you say it isn't. One of us is obviously mistaken. Knowing the paltry little I know, I cannot believe it is me."

Paradoxically, given his attitude toward reviewers, Saroyan was careful to save, label, and order everything he wrote so that future

scholars and critics might redress the past's not always benign neglect. The last twenty years of Saroyan's life—the Paris-Fresno years—reflect the ambiguity of the situation. He set out simultaneously to organize his early life and papers; to reflect ever more deeply on the past, while carefully documenting, at times by the hour, every event of his present; and to continue to write every day. His success in these areas was uneven. He was given the time neither to supervise the arranging of his archives nor to examine fully the making of his own past. To the very end, though, more fully than we can now imagine, he produced a constant, at times near compulsive, flow of energized literature.

The quantity of unpublished material left by him surpasses the massive bibliography of his already published works. Included are scores of plays, numerous novels and memoirs, stories, poems, essays, thousands of letters, nearly fifty years of journals, diaries, dream books, personal memoranda, and more than a thousand paintings and drawings. For convenience and inventory, these materials are now gathered at the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. The half dozen studies now in progress or in press, including this one, are based perforce on the published works, the few unpublished manuscripts in public and private collections, personal knowledge, and interviews with those who knew the man. Not until Saroyan's will is probated will investigators have access to the unknown Saroyan.

David Calonne's *William Saroyan: My Real Work Is Being* is the first study to present the entirety of known Saroyan as an integrated whole. Calonne's choice of title, part of a quotation from the last published work, *Obituaries*, is indicative of his approach: a close examination of the writing itself. There is little speculation in the volume. No theories to be tested. No dubious psychological or pseudo-psychoanalytic suppositions to improvise with. Grasping the universal character of Saroyan's thought, Calonne has been able to construct a sound and all-encompassing *apparatus criticus*, one with which we can reexamine an artist who was more than just an eccentric, "crazy" Armenian-American writer whose moment of glory passed with the forties.

Personal details are only called up for broad strokes: a fatherless California childhood, success on Broadway, marriage, family, and

divorce, semi-exile in Paris. Instead of dwelling on biographical details, Calonne searches for the inner coherence of every work, whether story, play, novel, or memoir. By revealing gradually the integrity and meaning of each, he fashions a general method for perceiving those ideas which inspired Saroyan and drove him to express that acquired wisdom in clear, usually humorous, and always poetical language.

In relating the author's style and temperament to those writers he was either influenced by—Whitman, Sherwood Anderson, Shaw—or had affinities with—Thomas Wolfe, Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett—Calonne provides the criterion by which Saroyan's place in twentieth-century literature can be judged. Clearly the poor critical reception (as opposed to warm audience acceptance) accorded many of Saroyan's theatrical works after the initial successes of *My Heart's in the Highlands* and *The Time of Your Life* (which won a Pulitzer Prize) was due primarily to the unrecognized avant-garde character of their themes and the method employed to stage them. Saroyan was among the first Americans to become comfortable with surrealism. And a decade before the works of Ionesco, Adamov, and Beckett, he was already writing powerful "absurd" plays. Later, Saroyan was to be closely attracted to Beckett and the theater of the absurd because his own techniques and dramatic vision, too sophisticated and complex for Broadway in the 1940s, became the substance of serious theater in the 1950s.

In spare, elegant prose, singularly free of excessive adulation or sentimentality, Calonne has given us a meditation on Saroyan firmly anchored in the works themselves. With this study, proper assessment of Saroyan's literary worth can be said to have begun. In time Calonne's analysis may be modified here or refocused there; for the moment it consistently rings true. The book's adroit and convincing philosophical framework should serve as a catalyst for new studies on particular facets of Saroyan's writing. Henceforth, it will be difficult to discuss Saroyan without reference to this work. Though earlier writers have considered many of the points Calonne insists upon, none has synthesized them into a coherent system.

How unfortunate that such a clear vision of Saroyan was not produced decades ago. How sad Saroyan couldn't have read it.

A Letter To Saroyan

Paris, May 25, 1981

Dear Bill,

If cormorants might have their "heavenly tide," as you speculated here in Paris in "Days of Life and Death and Escape to the Moon" while describing the death of such a bird you witnessed once on the beach at Malibu, so too there is probably a special "heavenly public library" for writers, especially for book-crazy Armenian-American ones from Fresno, Calif. Surely such a heavenly library receives the Herald Tribune or you would not have considered going there for such a long time as eternity.

I know you will be pleased to read a letter sent from your own fifth-floor walk-up, 74 Rue Taitbout. In the apartment everything is fine — all the hats, the Tribunes neatly stacked though yellowing, your collected stones and pebbles, those under water in jars, those wrapped in napkins in jars, the rest on the mantels and the balcony — everything, systematically disorganized as you left it. The hallway is dustier than usual because of a renovation on the second floor, but the climb up the five flights of unvarnished wooden steps distracts the mind differently from floor to floor and at the top it's catching one's breath, as you used to say, that is the immediate preoccupation, not the dust.

May has been rainy and cold, rainier than any May I can remember in Paris, heavy rains like those winter downpours in Fresno. But on the 18th, the day you left Fresno and the "whole voyald" forever, it was wildly sunny and the flat was particularly luminous.

* * *

Your Paris agent, Michelle Lapautre, took care of the bills you were concerned about, and announced that Flammarion expects to release the French translation of the "Adventures of Wesley Jackson" in October. Arpik called from Haratch to say that the "Arts and Letters" supplement for July would be devoted to William Saroyan. (I am not sure if she knows that you immortalized her and the only Armenian daily in Europe in that yet-to-be-performed and unpublished play you wrote in 30 days a couple of Junes ago in Paris and quite exceptionally let my students at Fresno State read last fall. I am sure she will be pleased when she discovers that the action takes place in her editorial offices on Rue d'Hauteville.)

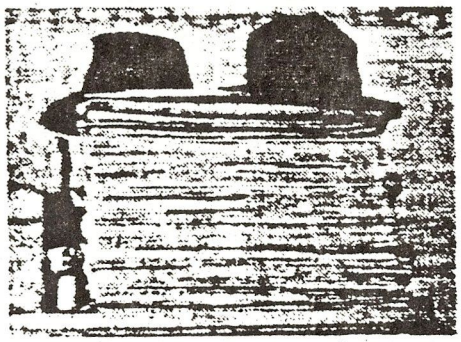
I finally met your lawyer friend of 20 years, Aram Kevorkian, after his return from seeing you in Fresno in mid-April. His news was good and bad, sad but sometimes laughing news too, the fusion or confusion of a proper Philadelphian's first impression of Fresno and what he discovered would be the last of you. (I understand even better now why you insisted on giving me your own keys to the apartment over my protest that I could use the set that Krikor Atamian had; you knew the ulcer was more than just an ulcer.)

Aram said that, at your request, he played Bach, some of your old favorites, while visiting you on West Griffith Way — just as he did on your pianola ("remarkably in tune") when we came up here to No. 74 a fortnight ago. He remembered you had bought that player piano a block down the street; he recalled the purchase of the apartment itself in 1960 from a realtor friend after you decided to settle in Paris. Like your brother Henry in the "Broken Wheel," your earliest published story I seem to recall, justifying his first extravagance — an enormous cake — by saying he thought it looked just right, you, seeing all that sky and light on the top floor, said to the bewildered agent, "I'll take it!" over his protesting, "But Mr. Saroyan, I have many other apartments to show you."

Here it is exactly 21 years later to the day; Aram didn't tell me that; you did, indirectly. For among the letters, manuscripts and clippings in the locked file cabinet that, with your paintings and some books, you wanted me to ship to Fresno State for what will be the William Saroyan Archive, part of an Armenian National Museum, I found an old book: "The Cornertown Chronicles" by Kathleen Knox, New York, 1880.

Inside the front cover was the short inscription that explained why, unlike the thousands of other books piled everywhere in these four rooms, it was under lock and key: "My first day here was May 25, 1960. William Saroyan." It occurred to me that 21 years at this address is the longest you have been at any of the places you've "done time," as you once put it, even longer than your early interrupted years in Fresno or the later ones there or in San Francisco and New York. During these past decades I guess Paris was more your home than anywhere in the world, though you will always be associated with Fresno, or rather Fresno with you.

Your friends Kevorkian and Atamian have met, and in true Armenian fashion found out quickly that they are nearly related. Once in 1963 or 1964, Aram remembers going with you to what he thinks must have been Atamian's tailor shop, not the new one on the Rue La Fayette but the original one around the corner from Taitbout on Châteaudun, to get a suit made. He repeated in French what you had already told Krikor, in the Bitlis dialect of Armenian you were famous for, not to make the jacket too short. Of course, each time you emphasized that point, you were assured that it would not be too short.



Dickran Kouymjian

The hats and stacked newspapers.

When you finally got the suit, the jacket was predictably too short and you were in a state. After fuming that you could never wear it, Aram apparently said to simply return it and be refunded, but you replied, "I can't do that to Krikor. Don't worry, I'll write a story and get more than my money back." And curiously enough, Bill, almost directly underneath Ms. Knox's book of 1880 was a carbon copy of "One of the 804 Armenian Tailors of Paris," which you wrote a decade later.

The most important news of this letter is that yesterday, Krikor, Aram and Angèle and I were together with hundreds of your other Paris friends at the Armenian church on Rue Jean Goujon for a requiem service in your memory performed by none other than His Holiness the Catholicos of all Armenians, Vazken I, here on a pastoral visit from Holy Etchmiazdin.

Though I know you wanted no religious service in Fresno, Paris is not Fresno and I recall how warmly you used to speak about your meetings with Vazken in Armenia. On this first Sunday after your material departure from earth, he wanted personally to eulogize you in your adopted hometown.

* * *

There was already to be a service in honor of those who died at Sardarabad in May, 1918, during the heroic struggle that stopped the Turkish Army from taking the Ararat valley and completing the genocide started in 1915, as you remembered hearing about at age 10 back in Fresno. Everyone seemed moved when the Catholicos turned from Sardarabad to Saroyan, beginning with the metaphor used in the obituary in Le Monde, signed by your old friend John Hess (he also did the one in the Trib, if you were wondering), comparing you to a geyser, "exploding." said His Holiness, "all the time with stories, and everywhere he went, bursting with laughter."

He also called you the prodigy of the nation, the vehicle through which three millenia of the Armenian experience was perhaps most perfectly expressed, you, the orphaned writer of an orphaned nation. The Catholicos concluded, "William Saroyan's writing. his humanism, speaks not just about or to the Armenians but to all people about all people."

Oh, I almost forgot, your mint is coming up once again all over the balcony, a bit late because it has been so cold, but robust and dark green. I still don't understand why you planted it in plain, gravelly sand, but the crazy Saroyan mint loves it. The water level in the two plastic buckets you left out last September to measure the accumulated rainfall during your annual winter migration is exactly 16.8 centimeters in the yellow one and 16.1 in the blue. I know you will appreciate that detail.

Your friend, Dickran Kouymjian

Dickran Kouymjian, a close friend of William Saroyan in the writer's last years, is professor of Armenian studies on leave from California State University at Fresno. He lives in Paris and, as did Saroyan, commutes to Fresno.