

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2025.21.1.143>

ARTISTIC LITERATURE AS EMBODIED HISTORY: READING ANTONIA ARSLAN'S “IL LIBRO DI MUSH/ SILENT ANGEL”

Angela Locatelli *

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4210-8397>

University of Bergamo, Italy

The literature on the Armenian Genocide (Metz Yeghèrn) comprises a great variety of genres and styles. Historical accounts, diplomatic reports, letters, eyewitness accounts, official political statements have been released worldwide providing a most relevant documentation. The aim of this essay is to show that artistic literature must be valuably added to these narratives. What novels provide to historical knowledge is a unique sense of history, whereby events are represented from the special perspective of the subjects involved. This phenomenological perspective will be illustrated through a reading of *Il libro di Moush* (2012) by the Italian writer of Armenian origin Antonia Arslan and its English translation as *Silent Angel* (2020) by Siobhan Nash-Marshall. The narration focusses on three women, a man and a young boy who escape from the massacres perpetrated in their valley, and who accomplish the heroic task of salvaging the *Book of Moush*, a precious illuminated manuscript, for posterity. History is “embodied” in their gaze and their sensations, as well as their perceptions of the contexts in which they move. Arslan's novel is one of her most moving contributions to (her) Armenian identity, after the world acclaimed novel *La masseria delle allodole* (2004) from which a renowned film by the Taviani Brothers was produced in 2007.

Keywords: historical knowledge, literary knowledge, embodied history, framing events, phenomenology, collective memory, ekphrastic narration.

Introduction

Fictional artistic accounts can offer an in-depth mimesis of events, because they shed light not only on certain events, but also on how such events were/are lived by their protagonists. In other words, literature counterpoises the totality of “daily life” against the partial registers of institutional disciplines (legal, medical, clerical, sociological, etc.), disciplines to which literature can offer a valuable contribution.

* angela.locatelli@unibg.it

Received: 02.02.2025
Revised: 11.03.2025
Accepted: 19.03.2025



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

© The Author(s) 2025

The narrative truth of literature is a phenomenological perspective (what here I call “embodied history”), which is that of the language in which events and subjects were/are shaped, i.e. the language of a time and place, and its specific *Lebensform*. In novels, plays and poems what comes to the forefront is the particular and the circumstantial. This makes literature a valuable historical document, not only in the sense of providing information and some “concrete materials”, but in its being the revealing trace of complex historical processes.

In this paper, literature’s role in providing historical knowledge will be illustrated with specific reference to Antonia Arslan’s *Il Libro di Mush*, originally written in Italian and subsequently translated into English as *Silent Angel*. This novel provides a unique view of the Armenian genocide through the eyes of five humble characters, three women, one man, and a little boy whose contribution to the salvage of the precious illuminated *Book of Moush* is crucial. Through their heroic efforts the homiliary is retrieved from the arson and attempted destruction of the Monastery of Surp Arakelots. Their narrated experience becomes a unique form of witness to the massacres perpetrated in the region.

The knowledge of literature as a historian’s task

A knowledge of literature and language is needed if the historian wishes to interrogate past and present events. Evidence for this comes not only from philosophers and literary critics, but also from historians and cultural historians. For example, historian E. P. Thompson’s (1963) innovative interest in the language of unconventional and marginal subjects can be seen as having introduced in historical studies an unprecedented and fruitful attention to subjects that had remained invisible in traditional historiography. Thompson’s attention to the quaint speech or vocabulary reported in documents, and to the strange spelling or typographical features of archive materials has educated several contemporary historians, who found themselves readily attuned to the philosophical and methodological lesson of Michel Foucault (1973) and to the programs of New Historicism (Veeser, 1989; Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000). Thompson’s insistence that “the historian has got to be listening all the time” (1963, p. 12-13) led him to the leap from traditional historiography to language and literature, and, significantly so, for the sake of a better historical truth. E. P. Thompson’s attempt to capture the voice of the dispossessed is a form of counter-history that can be seen as starting nothing less than a new history of “marginal subjects” and “minorities”. After this groundbreaking re-articulation of the discipline of history we have begun to inquire where and how to recapture its suppressed, interdicted, and non-surviving dimensions. Forgotten elements can and should undoubtedly be retrieved by thoroughly researching the archives, but suppressed elements are hard to put one’s finger on.

Arguments in favour of the documentary historicity of literature have been repeatedly put forward in “classic” Marxist and non-Marxist historicism (Lukács,

1963; Gramsci, 1971; Williams, 1958 and 1977; Barthes, 1993; Pomian, 2001; Ricoeur, 2000). The literariness of history has forcefully been argued by Hayden White (1973 and 1987), who has, however, been attacked by eminent historians, such as Carlo Ginsburg (2006), for dismantling the very idea of historical truth. It may be worth understanding a complementary perspective, i.e., the historicity of literature (which I am defending here, as I did in 2010 and 2011) and the literariness of history, while carefully avoiding the notion that historical truth is mere fiction. Perhaps more importantly (and this is my central thesis here), how can we recapture “what it felt like” to be “subjects” and live in specific historical circumstances and places? I believe that traditional history alone is unable to account for this, and that literature can provide more than just a glimpse into experiential truths, i.e. into the lived realities (Locatelli, 2010a, 2010b and 2011).

Il libro di Mush/Silent Angel: the novel’s historical knowledge

I have proposed that the knowledge of literature is “knowledge of life”, and that, as such, it is historical knowledge. Such knowledge is valuable, but not “scientific” in a traditional sense; it is phenomenological, in the philosophical sense of Merleau-Ponty (1976 [1945]) because it rests on literature’s ability to provide a sense of “what it feels” to be a certain subject, living in a certain space and culture, at a precise historical moment.

My reading of Arslan’s novel aims to illustrate this concept, starting from a detailed example of what I mean by “embodied history”, which is provided here. The very beginning of the genocide in the valley of Moush is conveyed through the perceptions and thoughts of Anoush and Kohar, two humble women, when they are bathing in the nearby river, after a day of hard work in the farm cellar cleaning vats and preparing jars to store vegetables for the winter. As they plunge into “the ice-cold water of the Aratsani river” near their village, they hear a disturbing sound, they hear, and make conjectures, while instinctively hiding:

At that very moment both women hear a rhythmic sound approaching fast from up the river. It is galloping horses. [...] Who are the approaching horsemen? Surely they are not Armenians. The Armenians do not have horses, nor would they ride so brashly, approaching like a loud thunderstorm. “They might be Kurds”, they think. [...] But, behind the galloping, they hear a dull and confused rumble, the trampling of a thousand feet, echoed by a thud, almost as if a whimper escaped from the trodden earth. Everything seems to be hushed with fear.

(Arslan, 2020, pp.11-12)

The simile of the thunderstorm anticipates the disaster. Most importantly, the sounds are recorded as they are perceived. Moreover, the stream of thought of the women “feels”, and poetically signals the earth’s cosmic lament (*the wimper escaped from the trodden earth*).

Later in the novel we find a precise historical explanation for this event, always tinged by the women’s emotion: *With their minds in flame and hearts desperate, they [the two women] watch trembling as the remnant of the Ottoman Third Army that survived the harsh battles against the Russian Army in the Caucuses marches alongside the river* (Arslan, 2020, p.12.).

The novel also provides a psycho-social interpretation of the deeds of the Ottoman Third Army (such an interpretation is also the task of a good historian):

Behind the still pride-filled cavalry, the troops show signs of fatigue and uneasiness, nursing the scars of wounds inflicted by men in hostile and unknown lands, and the despondency of confidence lost. [...] They are going to quarter in the fertile plains of Moush to lick their wounds and to avenge their wounded and abused pride, harboring deaf rage that seeks a target.

(Arslan, 2020, p.12)

However, the two female characters lack a classic historical knowledge of the events that they are experiencing; they are unaware of what historiography will transmit in its own disciplinary terms: *Anoush and Kohar know nothing about this. They only feel fear, ancestral fear, the insuppressible fear of the lamb before the woolf* (Arslan, 2020, p.12)

These quotations show that the historical knowledge of “events” is fruitfully juxtaposed, in the novel, to the characters’ sensations and feelings. Both “history” (the events caused by the actions of the Ottoman Third Army) and “embodied history” (how the women “feel” these events) are simultaneously conveyed in the text, thereby demonstrating that the historical and the literary have their own specific way of “framing events” (Locatelli, 2010). Literature deals with characters and their stories (even The Ottoman Third Army is a character in the novel, a character whose goals, ambitions, frustrations, it is the narrator’s task to represent), while historiography speaks of events in general terms by (hopefully) providing well investigated and documented evidence, rather than tendentious or fraudulent information.

In the case of Armenian history, a significant innovative contribution in combining linguistic, cognitive, and historical knowledge has been provided by Seda Gasparyan and her colleagues (Gasparyan, 2014). The volume edited in 2014 deals with a solid and exemplary corpus of relevant texts that include: diplomatic reports, letters, eyewitness accounts, official political statements released worldwide, etc., all of which are – and this is the novelty of the book – studied through a linguo-cognitive perspective.

Literature offers an experiential view of events, through the particular subjective perspective of each character. *Il libro di Mush* addresses these issues most effectively through a strategy that I would call “ekphrastic narration”, which “compels” the reader into a fuller understanding of the words associated with genocide: “killings”, “rape”, “torture”, “burning people alive”, “destructions”. Ekphrasis makes the atrocities more vivid in the reader’s visual imagination and hence comprehension. Two instances are exemplary of this ekphrastic form of narration: the discovery of Anoush’s baby, and the encounter with Old Zacharias.

When, in the darkness of the night, the two women traverse the village in a crescendo of horror:

All of a sudden they hear what sounds like an almost supernatural moan. [...] Leaning on each other, Anoush and Kohar slowly make their way toward the sound and nearly stumble over a bundle. “Stop!” Anoush yells. “There’s something here.”

They bend down and run their fingers over it and realize it is a cloth, and wrapped in the cloth is a child. [...] “This is my son; it’s Krikor. I can feel it.” She quickly gathers the bundle and presses it to her heart. But the cries of before have ceased, and caressing that little head, Anoush feels something soft and wet between her fingers.

(Arslan, 2020, p.16)

The second example of ekphrastic narration is provided in the episode in which the five fugitives arrive at a peaceful hut after a long, dangerous and exhausting march. They see that:

The door is open, in the back there is a man bent over the fireplace. He is an old man with long grey hair and heavy shepherd’s boots. [...] Eleni looks at him fixedly, wondering at his silence. “What’s wrong, old man? Have they harmed you?”

The man tries at first to elude the penetrating gaze, then lets himself fall on the stone, makes a strange sound, and opens his mouth. In that blackened cavity they see the stub of a tongue.

(Arslan, 2020, p.86)

The historical role of literature in transmitting *Lebensformen* is an important feature of this novel. Kohar’s stream of thought is also an eloquent form of historical memory, an intensely personal but collective memory as well (Halbwachs, 1980). It

provides a precious account of how life was lived in rural Armenia before the storming and pervasive violence of the genocide.

There is no returning; Kohar well understands. The houses that had been brutally raped, desecrated by violence and death, have begun to close in on themselves, to guard the secrets of their dead. They have become tombs. They will no longer give warmth and shelter to the living. The lowly objects and simple things that constituted that whole which was the life of the village with its customs – jars for fragrant herbs; pitchers of water for the wayfarer; rolled-up mats for shared sleep; underground ovens, the tonirs; the ancient church with its lace-like reliefs; the poor school; the thousand-year-old khatchkars placed outside the village by ancestors to ward off evil [...] – everything, everything, would be destroyed and pillaged. [...] Of the thousands of Armenian villages in the plains of Moush, only the names would endure in the memories of the few survivors in exile, in the lyrics of nostalgic songs.

(Arslan, 2020, p.27)

The memory of the tragic events in the valley of Moush obviously also survives in novels, such as Arslan's, when it tells that houses have become tombs, when it names objects, both lowly (the herbs jars, the tonirs) and noble (the khatchkars, the church ornaments). This is not simply a list of what has been destroyed (also a good historian can, and should record that), but a recalling of the past, in the affectionate and nostalgic tones that phenomenologically articulate loss and memories.

The two titles of the novel: translation as interpretation

Last, but not least, a word seems due on the issue of the English translation of the Italian original. The most striking discrepancy is the title itself. *Il libro di Moush* (Italian title) literally means *The Book of Moush*, while the English title of the novel is *Silent Angel*. The original title clearly underlines the precious object that the heroic efforts of Kohar, Anoush, Eleni, Makarios and Hovsep managed to preserve, their treasure, an object of devout veneration for them and all Armenians in the novel, and a uniquely astounding illuminated book for posterity in the non-fictional world. The Epilogue of the novel, that reads: *And with the book shines the memory of Anoush and Kohar, the strong women of Moush* (Arslan, 2020, p.106) corroborates my reading of the novel, which proposes that history is not made only by prominent figures, but rather by ordinary people and that they can be the protagonists of heroic deeds, when guided by courage, determination and empathy.

The English translation of *Il libro di Mush* by Siobhan Nash-Marshall was published in 2020 by Ignatius Press, a Catholic publisher in San Francisco. This explains, at least in part, the orientation of the reading in mystical and religious terms, including the above-mentioned striking difference in the title. The English title *Silent Angel* emphasizes a deeply religious faith in a Providential intervention in human affairs on the part of the protagonists, and in the narrative voice. Belief is ingrained in the characters' attitude, and is corroborated by repeated references in the text to the presence of an Angel watching over the humble fugitives, and crowning their unceasing efforts, motivated by both the desire to escape the massacre and faith in their mission to save the holy homiliary, at all costs, even in front of the greatest adversity.

The translator has unfortunately not illustrated or motivated her choices in an interview (Ignatius Press, 2020), but has limited herself to a rather cryptic remark on the original Italian language being “red” and English being “blue”. One wishes she had elaborated further on this. What emerges from the interview is the insistence on the idea of the novel as an example of Christian narrative.

A significant change in the English edition is also the addition of a sort of subtitle “A Novella” in *Silent Angel*, which is absent in the original. Arslan’s *Il libro di Mush* does not refer to narrative genre in the front page. Does then “A Novella” refer to the brevity of the book (136 pages in Italian and 122 pages in English)? Or to a supposedly strongly fictional, rather than documentary, storytelling dimension of the text? And yet, the translator in her interview underlines the “concreteness” of the tale. More explanations from the translator/ editor would therefore have been appreciated.

However, the two interpretations of the novel, the historical and the mystic, do not seem to contradict each other (good literature can always say more than one thing at once to perceptive readers), especially because of the strong religious tradition of the Armenian people, a crucial element of their cultural identity as well as their indomitable character in front of adversity.

Conclusion

The conclusion of my reading of *Il libro di Mush/Silent Angel* will be somehow unusual, in strictly academic terms. In fact, it wishes to be an homage to the Armenian people, in recognizing their unique courage and resilience, as illustrated in my historical and phenomenological interpretation of Arslan’s novel. My praise is, once more, grounded in her words:

The Armenian people have learned to bow their heads when persecution rears its head, to shut themselves up in opaque silence, to disconnect from their own thoughts, and then slowly to get back up. Like stalks of wheat, after a storm has crushed but not broken them, they sway in the breeze the next day.

(Arslan, 2020, p. 3)

Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

References

Arslan, A. (2012). *Il Libro di Mush* [The book of Mush]. Skira: Milano.

Arslan, A. (2020). *Silent Angel. A Novella*. Siobhan Nash-Marshall [Trans.]. San Francisco: Ignatius Press and The Augustine Institute.

Barthes, R. (1993). *Le discours de l'histoire* [The discourse of history]. In R. Barthes (Ed.). *Essais Critiques IV* [Critical Essays] (pp. 163-177). Paris: Seuil.

Foucault, M. (1973). *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences*. New York: Random House.

Gallagher, C., & Greenblatt, S. (2000). *Practicing new historicism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Gasparyan, S. (2014). *The Armenian Genocide. A linguocognitive perspective*. Yerevan: Yerevan State University Press.

Ginsburg, C. (2006). *Il filo e le tracce: vero, falso, finto*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (Q. Hoare & N. Smith Ed. and Trans.). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Halbwachs, M. (1980). *On collective memory*. New York: Harper Colophon.

Ignatius Press. (2020). *FORMED Book Club: Silent Angel, by Antonia Arslan (Interview with translator Siobhan Nash-Marshall)*. [Video]. Youtube, Retrieved January 26, 2025.

Irimia, M., & Dragos, I. (2011). *Author(ity) and the canon. Between institutionalization and questioning literature from high to late Modernity*. Bucharest: Bucuresti Institutul Cultural Roman.

Locatelli, A. (2010a). Framing events: literary and historical knowledge. In A. Locatelli (Ed.) *La conoscenza della letteratura/The Knowledge of Literature*, Vol IX (pp. 7-18). Bergamo: Bergamo University Press, Sestante Edizioni.

Locatelli, A. (2010b) "I give you my word(s)": Layered realism and Images of Life in Literature. In P. Lyytikainen, T. Klapuri, M. Maijala. (Eds.). *Genre and Interpretation* (pp. 109-121). University Press of Helsinki.

Locatelli, A. (2011). Description in literary and historical narratives. Rhetoric, narratology and ways of seeing. In M. Irimia & I. Dragos (Eds.). *Author(ity) and The Canon. Between Institutionalization and Questioning Literature from High to late Modernity* (pp. 115-126). Bucharest: Bucuresti Institutul Cultural Roman.

Lukács, G. (1963). *The Historical Novel*, transl. by H. Mitchell and S. Mitchell. Boston: Beacon.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1976 [1945]). *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

Pomian, K. (2001). *Che cosa è la storia* [What is history]. Milano: Mondadori.

Ricoeur, P. (2000). *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* [Memory, History, Forgetting]. Paris: Seuil.

Thompson, E.P. (1963). *The making of the English working class*. London: V. Gollancz.

Veeser, H. A. (1989). *The new historicism*. New York and London: Routledge.

White, H. (1973). *Metahistory*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

White, H. (1987). *The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. New York: Harper.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**ԳԵՂԱՐՎԵՍՏԱԿԱՆ ԳՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՈՐՊԵՍ
«ՄԱՐՄՆԱՎՈՐՎԱԾ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ»։ ԱՆՏՈՆԻԱ ԱՐՄԼԱՎԻ
IL LIBRO DI MUSH/ԼՈՒՌ ՀՐԵՇՏԱՎՈՐՎԵՊԸ**

Անջելա Լոկատելի

Հայոց գեղասպանության (Մեծ Եղեռնի) մասին գրականությունը ներառում է ժանրերի և ոճերի մեծ բազմազանություն։ Ամբողջ աշխարհում հրապարակվել են պատմական փաստաթյուրներ, դիվանագիտական գեկույցներ, նամակներ, ականատեսների վկայություններ, պաշտոնական քաղաքական հայտարարություններ, այդուհանդեռ, այս ցանկում ընդգրկված չեն գեղարվեստական գրականությունը, մինչդեռ այն պետք է ավելացվի, քանի որ գրականությունը նույնպես կարող է փոխանցել ոչ միայն պատմական գիտելիքներ, այլև հեղինակի պատմության յուրահատուկ զգացողությունը։ Հենց այս գեղանունով գիտական հեռանկարն է, որ ներկայացվում է հայկական ծագում ունեցող իտալացի գրող Անտոնիա Արալանի *Il libro di Mush* (2012) և նրա *Լուռ հրեշտակը* (2020) անգլերեն թարգմանության մեջ։ Գիրքը երեք կանանց, մեկ տղամարդու և մեկ երիտասարդ տղայի մասին է։ Նրանք փախչում են իրենց հովտում ընթացող շարդերից և փրկում *Սշո Գիրքը* թանկարժեք ձեռագիրը՝ սերունդներին փոխանցելու համար։ Պատմությունը «մարմնավորվում է» նրանց հայացքներում և զգացողություններում, ինչպես նաև պատմական համատեքստերում։ Արալանի վեպը (նրա) հայկական ինքնության ամենահոգիչ արտացոլումներից մեկն է։

Բանալի բառեր՝ պատմական գիտելիք, գրական գիտելիք, մարմնավորված պատմություն, իրադարձությունների շրջանակ, ֆենոմենոլոգիա, հավաքական հիշողություն, էքֆրաստիկ շարադրանք։