

AKRAM AYLISLI, VILLAGE PROSE, WORLD LITERATURE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis takes Akram Aylisli's *Farewell, Aylis* as an occasion to dwell on World Literature. Tracing Aylisli's development as a Soviet writer of Azerbaijani "village prose," I follow the displacements of the village enacted in his recent works. These displacements reflect Aylisli's response to the violent events associated with the end of the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus. While carrying on the traditions of "village prose" in a way, Aylisli stands against the chauvinistic forces that conscripted many of its leading figures in Russia. Aylisli's response rather involves 1) addressing taboo histories of communal violence denied by nationalist mythologies and 2) claiming kinship with authors beyond the established national literature of Azerbaijan. In this sense, he practices a version of the idea—old, yet revolutionary—that "poetry is the universal possession of humankind."

This thesis contains previously published material.

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I dedicate this thesis to Akram Aylisli, who has proven dedication in deed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In November 2018, Akram Aylisli's *Farewell, Aylis: A Non-Traditional Novel in Three Parts* was published by Academic Studies Press' Central Asian Literature in Translation Series. The book represents Katherine Young's authorized English translation from Aylisli's Russian versions of *Iemen* (1992), *Kamennye sny* (2011), and *Grandioznaia probka* (2011).¹ Together with a Latvian translation, which appeared in a small print run in 2015, *Farewell, Aylis* represents the only complete, authorized publication of Aylisli's non-traditional novel. Coming six years after the violent reaction that met the initial publication of Aylisli's controversial *Kamennye sny*, or *Stone Dreams*, in Azerbaijan, this publication is welcomed by many who hope that it will bring attention to the issues raised by the novel and the political persecution that has been brought to bear against Aylisli in Azerbaijan.² As this book has been very important to my own development as a scholar,³ I take its appearance in English as an occasion to revisit this

¹ This is an English translations from the Russian of works originally written in Azerbaijani, two of which the author translated himself. See Katherine Young's interview with Paulette Beete from August 2016 in *Art Works Blog*, where she says: "[Aylisli] himself translated *Stone Dreams* into Russian, and he says that his version in Russian is better than the original in Azeri," which he was not allowed to publish in Azerbaijan." This thesis will address the question of translation by referring to the Russian and Azerbaijani texts when possible.

² Aylisli has received support from the international community and from some within Azerbaijan. "A number of prominent Russian writers, members of Russia's PEN CLUB such as Sergey Kaledin, Lev Anninskiy, Victor Erofeev and Boris Akunin (a.k.a. Georgi Chkhartishvili), as well as a number of Azerbaijani writers and intellectuals, including famous writer and screenwriter Rustam Ibragimbekov, also spoke out in defence of Aylisli [...]" (Mamedov, "Scandal", 48). Beyond this, an entire issue of the second volume of the journal *Caucasus Survey* (2014) is devoted to Aylisli. More recent articles surrounding the new translation of the novel include pieces from *Calvert Journal*, *Eurasianet*, and *Mamul*, references to which can be found at the end of this thesis.

³ I worked at ADA University in Baku from 2012-2015, where I taught a class dealing with Aylisli's novel. As a result of my experience there, I read a conference paper in Prague on the Day of Remembrance of the Armenian Genocide. The proceedings of the conference were published as "Proceedings of IAC-SSaH 2015: International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities."

non-traditional novel in terms of how it relates to current discourses surrounding “translation,” “national,” “world” and “minor” literatures. More explicitly, this translation of Aylisli’s work is a chance to examine the writer’s mature reflections on his vocation as he negotiates the transition from “village prose,” the mode with which his early work has been most closely associated, to the “global novel,”⁴ perhaps the most recent manifestation of “world literature.”

1.1 Introduction: World Literature and the Global Novel

What is World Literature? asks Damrosch in his influential analysis of this central concept of the humanities, explaining that, ever since Goethe announced that “poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men [...] the epoch of world literature is at hand,” the nature of world literature has been “extraordinarily elusive” (Damrosch 1). While it has typically

⁴ Aylisli does not identify himself with either of these movements, which he thinks are the inventions of critics (personal correspondence). Be that as it may, they are useful points of departure for discussing his work. The “global novel” will be discussed in more detail below. With regard to “village prose” According Kathleen Parthé’s *The Radiant Past*, “village prose” represents the most significant literary movement in the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the 1980s. Parthé calls it a “nostalgic” or “rear-guard” reaction to Soviet Realism’s orientation toward the “radiant future” and its positive portrayal of collectivization, looking to the village as a source of value and a way of life. Aylisli differs from many of the leaders of Russian “village prose” in so far as, unlike them, he has not endorsed nationalist mythology but has rather chosen to address taboo histories of communal violence that undo nationalist mythologies. His work continues to draw on the parameters Parthé sets out: nostalgia for “the radiant past” rather than orientation towards the future (48), the village as a source of value and way of life (5-11), and *byt* and childhood as a chronotopes (20-28; 52-63). Parthé shows how “village prose” had always been concerned with the entrance of “history” into the village (49-52). The question is: how has Aylisli adapted this mode to address history and the literary process after *glasnost*, which drastically altered the conditions under which “village prose” existed in the Soviet literary process, and after the end of the Soviet Union? To suggest a possible response: in contrast to several of his Russian “post-village prose” counter-parts, including his friend Vasilii Belov, Aylisli has chosen to address taboo histories of communal violence denied by the nationalist mythology of the new regime as well as to claim kinship with literary traditions beyond local lore, Russian literature, and the established national literature of Post-Soviet Azerbaijan. This is part of the reason why his writing was so explosive in Azerbaijan. Aylisli differs from other major figures of “village prose” in that he has not tried to demonize the foreign “other” so as to idealize a mythical identity but has rather tried to show how the “other” is essential to his identity as an Azerbaijani man and writer.

been conceptualized in terms of “the classics,” “masterpieces,” and “windows onto other worlds” (Damrosch 15), the arrival of World Literature in the age of global modernity has garnered a fair share of criticism. Beyond seeming to deny the plurality of worlds, and aside from persistent prejudice in favor of the literatures of the European metropole, the institution of World Literature has been criticized both in terms of its reception and production. As Damrosch points out, books considered as windows into other worlds are often read only in terms of one’s own interests. He explains, “Even today, foreign works will rarely be translated at all in the United States, much less widely distributed, unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question” (18). As this suggests, problems with the production of World Literature are closely related. While authors “who have small audiences at home or who are censored by their governments” have a greater chance of achieving recognition among foreign readers in translation, several critics express concern that writing primarily for foreign audiences may lead to a watering down of literary quality and complexity. As Damrosch says, “Writing for publication abroad can be a heroic act of resistance against censorship and an affirmation of global values against local parochialism; yet it can also be only a further stage in the leveling process of a spreading global consumerism” (18), or the “Disneyfication of the globe” (17). This “Disneyfication” is primarily what Emily Apter opposes in her book *Against World Literature*, where she distinguishes lowercase “world literature,” defined as the sum total of literary texts in the all world’s languages, from uppercase “World Literature,” an academic institution and culture industry (Apter 2). In particular, she harbors “serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of

cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities’” (2).

As a countermeasure to this institution, Apter invokes the literary practice or “politics of untranslatability,” which she will use to deflate “the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors” (3). That is, to avoid the dangers hidden in the assumption of universal translatability (into English), Apter wants to activate the untranslatable aspects of literary texts as a fulcrum to move the discourse surrounding world literature. “Translation theory as *Weltliteratur* would challenge flaccid globalisms that paid lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal “big tent” syllabi taught in English” (Apter 3). Damrosch’s response involves, not refuting Goethe’s idea, but changing how it is approached. For example, he analyzes the history of *Conversations with Goethe* outside of Germany, uncovering how the role of the author Eckermann has been erased from English translations. Defining world literature as “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (Damrosch 4), he argues “world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading” (5). In other words, a work “becomes” world literature at a particular historical moment, thereby taking on a second life, whose story can be extremely revealing, especially when read against the grain. Damrosch’s project involves close analyses of these cases or events, recognizing “world literature itself is constituted very differently in different cultures” (26).

While the problems raised by Damrosch and Apter are recognized by Kirsch in *The Global Novel*, a study of the 21st century's major global novelists, Kirsch undertakes to show that the works of Pamuk, Murakami, Atwood, and Adichie, represent active attempts to come to grips with the "global" as an essential part of contemporary experience, rather than passively manifesting the worst symptoms of globalization. Their works, he writes, are "faithful to the way the global is actually lived—not through the abolition of place, but as a theme by which place is mediated. Life lived here is experienced in its profound and often unsettling connections with life lived elsewhere, and everywhere" (12). His hyperbolic claim is that "the global novel is now the most important means by which literature attempts to reckon with humanity as such" (13).⁵

While this certainly does not represent an exhaustive survey of contemporary discourse surrounding World Literature, it is sufficient to sketch out the contours of the basic stances taken toward it by contemporary critics. As Aylisli's works of Azerbaijani "post-traumatic village prose" become global novels of their own, they become involved in the problems that Damrosch, Apter, and Kirsch have addressed. To begin, they face the problem of reception, since Azerbaijani literature remains almost completely unknown and unpublished in the west. And even though an important configuration of World Literature did exist in the Soviet Union itself, where it could not help but affect Aylisli, the nature of that configuration and the "change of world" involved in the Soviet Union's

⁵ As provocative as it might be, this is also something of an overstatement. A lyric recently given to me by a friend might speak as much if not more of humanity as such. "Seattle: Morning café; a couple talks/Politics as indignant as utopian./How have they come/To this idyll of displacement,/This water-broken city of hills?/For the moment we call it home./Suddenly everything east/I left, or was left by,/Dissolves to the spring water/We kids collected by the train,/That pure cold boiling through/The sandy bottomed swan's haven;/Long since poisoned, now it's fresh/I've come too far to resent/What evaporates our life" (Hamel 13). Or perhaps this "minimal note to no one": "The poet has nothing of importance to say to man. Why? Because for the poet, man does not yet exist" (saiz 48). This points to a possible flaw in Kirsch's otherwise well-argued work.

fall left Azerbaijani literature in a seeming disconnect from the world. Tyrell describes the situation as follows:

Until now, textbooks described and analyzed Azerbaijani literature in isolation, separate from events and movements taking place in the larger world. This approach prevented any thorough understanding of Azerbaijani literature, especially from a broader perspective. It made it impossible to establish some sort of meaningful connection between this literature, and its human and universal application. Today, this issue poses a major problem for contemporary Azerbaijanis. They remain baffled as to where to place their literature in the context of world literature (Tyrell 16).

Aylisli's most recent works might be read obliquely as responses to this situation. While their after-life-story as world literature has yet to be written—the book has just been re-born on these shores—when read carefully, they express the author's ideas regarding his vocation as a writer and his relation to world literature. In the close-readings of the three parts of *Farewell, Aylis* that compose this thesis, I will concentrate precisely on this.

Along with demonstrating that *Farewell, Aylis* was not written to serve the literary tourism of western readers à la Damrosch and Apter, but instead, while addressing itself to the works of Faulkner, Rushdie, and Marquez, contains pointed responses to the local literary world of Azerbaijan, I will show that the author's works express an interpretation and practice of world literature, which—despite being almost as old-fashioned as Goethe himself—has nevertheless proven revolutionary in our time.

1.2 Akram Aylisli

Before approaching these questions of world literature directly in terms of Aylisli's work, however, it is first necessary to discuss the context of his novel's creation in Late- through Post-Soviet Azerbaijan, precisely because this context will not be universal knowledge among Aylisli's English readership. In this regard, particular

attention must be paid to the results of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, a bitter war Azerbaijan waged with its majority-Armenian region Nagorno-Karabagh in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, eventually losing approximately one fifth of its territory. This is not the place to undertake an exhaustive narrative of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict from 1988-1994 up to the present, nor, going still further back, to narrate the complex history of Azerbaijani/Armenian relations in the South Caucasus. To attempt what Thomas de Waal has done in *Black Garden*, i.e. provide a responsible “third narrative” of this history would strain the coherence of this thesis and lead to the neglect of its more immediate concern. At the risk of oversimplification, therefore, I limit myself to noting with de Waal that this conflict had its roots in 1) Stalin’s allocation of Nagorno-Karabagh—an ethnically-mixed, though predominantly Armenian region of the South Caucasus, to Azerbaijan in 1921 (de Waal, *Black Garden* 66); 2) the political organization of the USSR itself, where power was negotiated primarily through Moscow rather than between the republics (de Waal, *Black Garden* 21); and 3) the results of Gorbachev’s reforms.

To reiterate the basic story: while the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabagh had gestured toward seeking unification with the Armenian SSR prior to 1985 (de Waal, *Black Garden* 16), the renewal of these gestures on a massive scale in 1988 in the era of *glasnost*’ and *perestroika* had the effect of setting off dormant ethnic tensions and violence in the region. The escalation of violence that resulted from the movement among Nagorno-Karabagh’s Armenian population to unite with Armenia—which includes brutal pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait (Feb 1988) and Baku (Jan 1990) as well as violence against Azerbaijanis in Armenia and Karabagh itself—eventually lead to both

nations losing much of their ethnic-diversity. By 1989, nearly all the approximately 350,000 Armenians in Azerbaijan (excluding Karabagh) and 200,000 Azerbaijanis living in Armenia left their homes seeking refuge in the other nation (de Waal 2003, 18 and 62). Over the next five years, Azerbaijan and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabagh (with Armenian support) waged brutal war, as a result of which Nagorno-Karabagh became a de facto independent republic. Subsequent negotiations through the Minsk Group have not led to peace, and people continue to die in border skirmishes. The Aliyev family in Azerbaijan, which came to power after the end of the USSR in large part thanks to Heydar Aliyev's negotiation of these events, has since greatly prospered because of them; the regime has fostered a culture of victimhood and an ideology of nationalism,⁶ which have helped it to secure its power in Azerbaijan by focusing social discontents on an imagined enemy. As testimony to the ill effects of these developments, one need only pass the magnifying glass over the case of Akram Aylisli.

Prior to the publication of *Stone Dreams*, Akram Aylisli (aka Akram Najaf oglu Naibov b. 1937-) was a renowned writer and well-respected public figure in Soviet Thaw and post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Born in Aylis, Nakhchivan, he first gained attention during the *otepel'* as a Soviet author of Azerbaijani "village prose." Said to have been the favorite author of Azerbaijan's third president—the former leader of the Azerbaijani KGB and fellow Nakhchivanian—Heydar Aliyev, Aylisli was awarded the title of People's Writer of Azerbaijan in 1998 and served in Azerbaijan's National Assembly from 2000 to 2005. After the publication of *Stone Dreams*, however, which to my knowledge is the first literary treatment of the pogroms against Armenians carried out in Sumgait (1988) and Ordubad (1919) by a Turkic author sympathetic to Armenians,

⁶ See Alstadt's *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*.

Aylisli and his family became the target of government persecution. As Mamedov recounts, because of *Stone Dreams*, Aylisli, a 75 year-old-man, was stripped of his prestigious title and pension; a member of parliament called for his DNA to be tested for Armenian blood; another offered a \$10,000 bounty to anyone who would cut off his ear; Aylisli's family members lost their jobs; and book-burning rallies were organized across Azerbaijan, including in the author's native Ayilis, the inspiration of his many stories and novels (Mamedov 2014, 47-8). While a minority did come out in support of Aylisli, including a number of prominent Azerbaijani artists, for many Azerbaijanis the author looked, at best, like an opportunist making a cynical bid for the Nobel Prize in imitation of Orkhan Pamuk, and, at worst, like a traitor in Azerbaijan's on-going conflict with the Armenians of Artsakh/Karabagh. Needless to say, it was not necessary to read the book to arrive at these conclusions. Continuing to suffer from state terror, Aylisli, now an 81-year-old man, resides in Baku, unable to leave Azerbaijan despite his efforts and an international campaign organized on his behalf.

CHAPTER II

YEMEN⁷

As previously stated, *Stone Dreams* is likely the book for which Aylisli will be remembered, both for its aesthetic experimentation (i.e. its status as “post-traumatic village prose,” a “novel-requiem”) and for the controversy which surrounds it. All the more reason to begin the analysis of Aylisli’s non-traditional novel not with *Stone Dreams*, but with the *povest’ Yemen* (1992),⁸ a work that has to date escaped sustained scholarly attention. While written nearly 15 years prior to *Stone Dreams*, *Yemen* treats some of the same historical events—the story ends in Baku in December 1989—though in *Yemen* these events have a very different presence. They move in “the background” of the tale, but they do so in such a way as to subtly disturb the foreground as the narrative follows the protagonist, Safaly *muallim*,⁹ across time and space up to the end of the Soviet Union. Though the book mentions Sumgait,¹⁰ briefly discusses Karabagh,¹¹

⁷ I delivered the ideas presented in this chapter at the 2018 ASEES conference in Boston. I am indebted to the participants on my panel, in particular Prof. Anna Oldfield, for the feedback that I received. I am also indebted to IREX, from whom I received funding to attend the conference.

⁸ My citations from the Russian translation of *Yemen* will be drawn from Mirza Huseinzade’s Russian translation. The original Azerbaijani version is available in part; but all copies that I have found have been distorted or made illegible. For example, the Azerbaijani original accessible through the national library of Azerbaijani.

⁹ *Muallim* is a title of respect; something like “Master” or “Mister.”

¹⁰ For example, in the hero’s imaginary dialogue with Neil Armstrong: “‘Orwell. George Orwell!’ The American professor leaped up from his armchair, his cry signifying, that he also agreed with Safaly *muallim*’s second monologue. ‘Lenin! NEP! Cultural Revolution! The collective farm! Wieners! Nukhbalal! Sumgait!’ Neil Armstrong seized the glass; this time he didn’t take a sip but drained it in a single gulp and wiped his lips with the back of his hand, Russian-style. Then he sat in his place and made a wry face, as if he were now gathering himself to give a lecture to all the students of the university in Cincinnati forthwith.”

But Safaly *muallim* didn’t allow his colleague to give that lecture.

“Mr. Neil! Professor, sir!” he said. “I most humbly ask you: do not say the word ‘Sumgait’ ever, anywhere. Talk about wieners, about Nukhbalal, but not about that!”

Here the blue eyes of Neil Armstrong looked at Safaly *muallim* with the same malice that Vaska once looked at Zarnigyar. ‘What do you mean by that, Comrade Safaly?’

presages the violent pogroms and reprisals of January 1990, and gives voice to some of the emerging reactions to these events in Azerbaijan in passing,¹² the novel is disturbing because it does not directly confront these events, nor does it constitute a linear narrative. Perhaps this accounts for why Mamedov does not mention *Yemen* in his survey of the contemporary literature on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Perhaps these issues were not treated explicitly enough in *Yemen*. Nevertheless, they do maintain an unsettling presence in the background of this representation of the presentiments of the end of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan, with the “psychosis,” to use Aylisli’s word, that was to follow.¹³ Furthermore, reading *Yemen* helps to show the consistency and integrity of Aylisli’s writing with regard to Azerbaijani-Armenian relations. This is an important reason not to ignore it, since the book discredits the attempts that have been made to

‘I swear by Allah, Mr. Neil, I don’t mean anything. Only the comrades in charge could share their objective thoughts with you about that. But one of our especially conscientious comrades becomes very nervous on hearing that word. [Раньше у него болел живот при слове «Гянджа»] Now conversations about Sumgait cause him a fit of bile. [...]

‘I know him very well,’ answered Neil Armstrong. ‘He’s a cannibal from the tribe of cultural cannibals [из попуасов].’

‘A cannibal?’ Safaly *muallim* couldn’t believe what he’d heard. ‘Professor, you probably mean to say ‘a cannu pol’? [популист]’

‘No! A cannibal is it, exactly.’

“Safaly *muallim* decided not to get into an argument with the famous astronaut” (Aylisli, *Farewell* 54-5).

¹¹ The issue of Karabagh comes up in conversations between Safaly and his neighbor Lora.

¹² For example, the diabolical figure of Ali Ziya, as well as Safaly’s ambivalent unconscious (illustrated by the conversation with Armstrong cited in footnote 8; the passage goes on to make clear that during those days “the conscientious people” who had written about the “friendship of peoples” during the Soviet Union, suddenly began calling for the deaths of Armenians).

¹³ Part of the importance of *Yemen* is to show the consistency of Aylisli’s work; when *Stone Dreams* was published, it was denounced as an opportunistic bid for the Nobel Prize by those who had either forgotten or had never read *Yemen*, which shows the direction in which Aylisli was going. His personal denunciation of the Sumgait pogroms as early as 1989 was also apparently forgotten.

slander Aylisli's *Stone Dream* as a piece of opportunism, attempts that rely on ignorance and cultural amnesia.¹⁴

Yemen is not a plot driven book: set in the second half of 1989, it follows the 72-year-old widower Safaly *muallim*, a former rector of an institute, as he journeys to a sanatorium outside Baku, encountering Ali Ziya, a famous writer and a fiendish figure from his past, only to return to his home just prior to the events of Black January.¹⁵ The narrative also follows Safaly back in time to a recent journey to his village Buzbulag, where he meets his uncle Khyzyr *kishi*, a man bearing an uncanny resemblance to William Faulkner, as well as a journey Safaly made with Ali Ziya to Yemen in 1962, where he has a strange vision of Khyzyr's home (the home of his childhood) in Buzbulag. Through Safaly's encounters and dialogues with other characters, including his elderly Armenian neighbor Lora and imagined dialogues between the professors Safaly and Neil Armstrong, Aylisli intimates a dread of some of the emerging "diabolical" perspectives on the events surrounding the end of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan, a dread which is all the more uneasy since it is not resolved nor heroically confronted by the narrative. The trouble with summarizing *Yemen* is well illustrated by its opening:

The idea to describe Safaly *muallim*'s life first came to me two or three years ago. At that time I thought a great deal about the strange life of that strange person [человек]. Bead by bead (speaking colorfully in the eastern style) [по-восточному цветисто]) I strung everything that happened to him together onto a thread, trying [пытаясь] to create [собрать] a necklace or something resembling a string of

¹⁴ See Aylisli's interview with Shura Burtin: "Brothers, let's face it—we did some awful things... This acknowledgement is the only way to start out and create something better. The devil is in those people who talk about checking my DNA, although they know perfectly well that I'm a Turk [Turok] through and through. Or that I wanted a Nobel Prize, as if I was trading wares in a bazar" (72-78).

¹⁵ "Black January," a foundational date for Azerbaijan's national narrative, refers to the entrance of Soviet Tanks into Baku on 20 January 1990. The justification given by Soviet Authorities was the ethnic violence that had broken out in Baku against Armenians on the 13th/14th of January. There may have been other reasons. For 5 days Baku went silent, without TV or Radio. 120 people were killed, and up to 700 wounded. For a more detailed account of events see Alstadt's *Azerbaijani Turks* (210-219).

prayer beads [четки]. But the thing is, the thread kept breaking, scattering beads all over the place [Но нить то и дело рвалась, рассыпались бусинки в разные стороны], this one to Buzbulag, that one in Yemen. I'm not even talking about [Я уж не говорю о] Zugulba, Bukhara, or the State of Mississippi—the birthplace [родине] of William Faulkner—in the South [на юге] of the United States of America (Aylisli, *Farewell 2*).¹⁶

While showing an ironic self-awareness of being an “oriental writer” in a geography still defined by the Soviet Union, the narrator speaks of how the story he had been contemplating scatters like the beads of a broken necklace or rosary, one to Buzbulag, another to Yemen, not to mention the sanatorium Zugul’be,¹⁷ Bukhara and Mississippi USA, the homeland of William Faulkner. All these places represent different directions in which the narrative does in fact go, and part of the narrative’s art involves following the unapparent connections between these beads/places even as they scatter over the earth. The reference to Faulkner and Mississippi is the most noteworthy example, in part because it constitutes the original *zaviazka*—or “nouement”—of the book.

¹⁶ I have included so many passages from the Russian here to show the extent to which, despite the translator’s efforts, Russian remains different from English. Some of these problems are, perhaps, technically resolvable; different words might be found. Others are inherent; Mississippi, or the capitalized South of the United States of America look and sound different in English than they do in Russian, indeed, a Russian marked by cultural difference: the narrator’s ironic “orientalish.” My own modified translation would read as follows: “The idea of describing Safaly *muallim*’s life first came to me two or three years ago. At that time I thought a great deal about the strange life of that strange man. Bead by bead (to speak “orientally,” in colors) I threaded all that happened to him onto a string, attempting to make a necklace or something recalling prayer beads. But time and again the thread broke, scattering beads in every direction: this one to Buzbulag, that one to Yemen. Not to mention Zugulba, Bukhara, or the State of Mississippi—the homeland of William Faulkner—located in the South of the United States of America.” The original Azerbaijani gives something like this: “The idea of writing something about Safaly *muallim*’s life first came to my mind two or three years ago. At that time I busied myself a lot about the strange life of that strange man. Whatever happened to him (let me speak with an eastern simile [təşbəhi]) I strung bead by bead onto a string, to make from it a necklace or something like prayer beads [təşbəhvəri]. But again and again the string broke, the beads scattered here and there: one to Buzbulag, one to Yemen. Not to mention Zugulba, Bukhara, and the one that came to the world of William Faulkner—the state of Mississippi in the South of the United States of America” (193). This is an exercise in comparison too complex to repeat at every turn. But it is important to point out that, while the English prose translation sounds like translation, with the inevitable problems this involves, the Russian sounds like a literary Russian reflecting on the cultural differences that constitute its reality.

¹⁷A sanatorium outside Baku

I was even planning to begin the life story [жизнеописание] of Safaly *muallim* with the story of Faulkner and Khyzyr *kishi*. Just imagine, Faulkner and Khyzyr *kishi*: is it possible to find a more interesting opening [завязку] for a work of literature? It's realistic and at the same time unusual. Its unconventionality [необычность] is completely understandable all by itself. And its basis in real life is that once, on just such a hot summer day, Safaly *muallim* made himself comfortable at home in an armchair—bathed in sweat, drinking tea—and suddenly his glance fell on a portrait looking at him from the bookshelf. That portrait was on the dust jacket of a thick book. A black-browed, lack-eyed, mustachioed man was looking at Safaly *muallim*. He was around fifty years old. And above the portrait, which was bordered with a black frame, “William Faulker” was written in bold, white letters.

Safaly *muallim* knew without question that William Faulkner was a great man. Safaly *muallim* had read something of the work of that famous writer. However, Safaly *muallim* had not bought that particular book himself. Safaly *muallim*'s daughter Rena had brought it from Leningrad where she was studying. And the book by Faulkner with the portrait on the dust jacket had been placed on a shelf then, and it stood just as it was standing now. That is, not so much like a book but a portrait. (Who knows, perhaps that black-browed, black-eyed, black-mustachioed person in the portrait reminded Rena not only of the writer Faulkner but of someone else!)

And on that hot summer day where, covered from head to toe in sweat [пропотевший до самых пяток], Safaly *muallim* quenched his thirst with tea, the person in the portrait reminded him of none other than his uncle Khyzyr *kishi*. Moreover, “reminded” is too weak a word—at that moment it seemed to Safaly *muallim* that the person in the portrait was not Faulkner but Khyzyr *kishi* himself. That same Khyzyr *kishi* who was a ninety-year-old resident of the village of Buzbulag and the uncle of Safaly *muallim*! (Aylisli, *Farewell* 2-3)

There are many ways of reading this strange *zaviazka*. Safaly's doctor reads it as a sign of “nostalgia,” or a sickness arising from the longing for home. The uncanny misrecognition of Faulkner would thus constitute an ironic expression for one of the major tropes of “village prose”: nostalgia and the search for the “radiant past.” It is worthwhile dwelling on this oxymoron: “a sense of uncanny nostalgia.” There is also a clearly self-referential literary meaning to Aylisli's use of Faulkner, whose map of the fictional Yoknapatawpha county is compared to Khyzyr *kishi*'s poor plot in Aylisli's Buzbulag.¹⁸ This comparison is complex, since, in the midst of setting up an identity, it suggests difference and

¹⁸ Parthé makes a connection between Faulkner (an writer of regional literature) and “village prose” (xiv). *Kishi* means “man,” “husband,” in Azerbaijani, with connotations of being open and brave.

potential rivalry: Khyzyr's small plot of land may not match Faulkner's for grandeur, just as Aylisli's literary land may not match Faulkner's in fame, but it may be no worse for all that.¹⁹ Aylisli seems to be asking, if Faulkner can take a seemingly unremarkable locale in Mississippi, a place all others ignore, and "create it,"²⁰ such that it occupies a central place in the world's literary consciousness, why can't the same be done for Buzbulag? The image suggests the creation of an alternative literary genealogy, or an unexpected, ambiguous "kinship" where a world-renowned modernist from Mississippi, known above all as the creator of a locale, enters a zone of identity with the Azerbaijani villager, and perhaps with the author standing in his shadow.

Part of the shock of the image involves the mutual estrangement of a canonical figure of World Literature and a figure standing for the world of Aylisli's "village prose," a strangeness that expresses one of the central concerns of the novel: what is becoming of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijani literature, the village, and "village prose" in the breakdown of the old Soviet structures. To be clear, the appeal to Faulkner does not indicate that Aylisli is turning opportunistically in search of world literary models at the expense of his own local experience. That Faulkner becomes a figure named Khyzyr *kishi* is significant in this respect; Aylisli is clearly drawing on the Islamic traditions surrounding the figure of

¹⁹ "This summer, when I suddenly remembered Safaly *muallim* once again in Governor's Garden (on the anniversary of the day that Armstrong landed on the moon), I also remembered the thing with Faulkner, of course. Now, two years later, it seemed to me for some reason not so funny but more sad. And not because Khyzyr *kishi* was a very unfortunate man compared to Faulkner. Who can know that? It's not even possible to know whether Khyzyr *kishi* considered himself inferior to other people or not. But there was undoubtedly something sad in comparing those two people living under one sky, one God, if only because by God's allegedly equal graciousness towards all, his ward Khyzyr *kishi* was master of at most a quarter of an acre of land, while Faulkner had used a colored pencil to circle twenty-five hundred square miles on the map of his country and written "William Faulkner, sole heir and master of this earth" and signed his name beneath" (Aylisli, *Farewell* 3-4).

²⁰ I deliberately use "create" rather than "recreate," underscoring the non-imitative aspect of artistic creation involved.

Khidr-Ilyas: an immortal man, patron saint of travelers and poets, in whose figure two prophets (Khidr and Ilyas) are already identified, and whose function involves seeing beyond the limited human wisdom of any age, the kind of wisdom Khyzyr later demonstrates in a conversation with Safaly, in which he simultaneously denounces those who live in Baku and religious bigotry.²¹ There does seem to be an ungraspable connection between Khyzyr *kishi* and Khydyr-Ilyas, though it must be pointed out that Khyzyr *kishi* is no prophet.²² He only comes to represent something of timeless value to the consciousness of Safaly.

In the section of the book recounting Safaly's enchanting/disastrous journey to Yemen with Ali Ziya in 1962 a similar uncanny recognition takes place. Once at their hotel in Sana, Safaly looks out his window and sees a "repetition" of the courtyard in Buzbulag where he grew up.

When he fearfully opened the door, Safaly *muallim* went into that garden; then not only did he forget his fear, but I would even say, if you believe me, that he even completely forgot that he was a Soviet citizen [...] In a word, that day Safaly *muallim* opened a direct route from the Yemeni garden where he himself was standing to the yard of his uncle Khyzyr *kishi* in Buzbulag without having obtained permission from any government or from the United Nations itself; without war, without any weapons, he'd amalgamated the world [слил мир воедино]. Now he was a Yemeni to the same degree that he was a native of Buzbulag. In other words, Safaly *muallim* was a citizen of the world. How wonderful that turned out to be, being a citizen of the world! (Aylisli, *Farewell* 19-20).

It belongs to the general mood of the narrative that this experience of borderless world, communicating across time—it is a return to Safaly's childhood—and space, is short

²¹In this conversation, he does not distinguish people based on their religion but upon their whole way of life. See also the way Aylisli plays with Khyzyr *kishi's* age: in the photo of Faulkner he remains a deathless middle-aged man, the same age that he remains in Safaly's memory, though in fact he may be as old as 99. In his vision in *Yemen*, which I address below, Khyzyr *kishi* is seen as being over 333.

²² The perceptions that suggest their relationship have more to do with Safaly *muallim's* subjective condition and experience of the world.

lived. Discovering that Safaly has gone missing, the writer Ali Ziya assumes Safaly has tried to defect. Fearing for himself, Ali Ziya denounces Safaly to the Soviet authorities, which eventually causes Safaly to lose his position as rector of the institute to a base substitute; years later in 1989, during the two friends' reunion at the sanatorium, Ali Ziya tries to re-write history and suggest that Safaly really did try to run. The story is so brazen it almost succeeds in convincing Safaly himself that there is "a fifth floor to a four-story building" (Aylisli, *Farewell* 36).

Aylisli thus develops the motif of Faulkner becoming Khyzyr *kishi* and the Sana courtyard becoming the courtyard in Buzbulag into a subjective experience of an uncanny identity suddenly recognized or scattered across the globe in unexpected ways, which leads Safaly to denounce the artificiality and impermanence of human boundaries and the forces that profit from them.²³ This experience ends almost immediately, however, and is taken through a much more brutal logic by Ali Ziya, who farcically misinterprets Safaly's absence as a form of political defection for which he fears taking all the responsibility; and in attempting to convince Safaly that the tragic-farce is truth, Ali Ziya almost makes him believe the unbelievable.

The notion of "a fifth floor to a four-story building" in this context is worth dwelling on. It is an image that on a certain level almost speaks for itself. According to

²³"Rouges, thieves, sons of bitches! What are you divvying up in this little world? You learned to read and write, you finished three or four books, and that's already enough for you to distribute the blessings of the world: this is my portion, that's yours, we'll deal this way with one people and that way with another. And you aren't ashamed to divide this unfortunate, small people into those from Baku, those from Karabagh, those from Nakhchivan. It's just because you thirst for glory, titles. Not even having become fully formed people, you want everyone to consider you as such, to bow down to you, idolize you. Without removing your peasant slippers, you dream of becoming heroes of the people. As if this world were really so grand! What's so big about it if you can make your way around it in a single nigh? How bug a world can it be if they plant beans in Yemen just as they do in Buzbulaq? Yes, it's small, this world—for those with human blood in their veins! But an animal must display its savage essence: attack, bring down, destroy, tear to pieces. What difference does it make to an animal whether the world is great or small, so long as its stomach is full? As long as it's sitting in a car and there's a medal on its chest?" (Aylisli, *Farewell* 21-22)

the logic of the story, it signifies the existence of a non-existent space, the unreal, like the space of fiction, where all is possible. For Safaly—and not only for him—this power represents a danger when it threatens to erase or distort the past, such as when Ali Ziya attempts to establish an official, farcical version of events that contradicts Safaly’s own unforgettable experience. On another level, the “fifth floor to a four-story building” constitutes a clear literary allusion. It refers to the novel *A Sixth Floor of a Five Story Building* by the Azerbaijani writer Anar (aka Anar Rzayev, born 1938-), one of Aylisli’s contemporaries, and someone who within the borders of Azerbaijan has enjoyed great success as a writer/novelist. That he serves as the prototype of Ali Ziya indicates a fundamental difference between the two writers, who belong to the same generation and who at one time were colleagues in Azerbaijan’s writer’s union. A rift between them seems to have opened up when Aylisli wrote what Anar, then president of Azerbaijan’s writer’s union, perceived as “pro-Armenian” articles in the wake of Sumgait. For this, Aylisli was denounced and kicked out of the Union. That this story serves as the prototype for certain parts of *Yemen*, which was written shortly after this rift developed, does not suggest that Aylisli undertook a form of personal revenge through literature in his *povest*. In other words, this is not back-stage gossip. Rather, it signals Aylisli’s criticism of a general “type” of writer whose features are merely drawn from Anar. The portrayal of Ali Ziya criticizes figures, like Anar, whose literature, for all its exploration of political and social repression,²⁴ has turned out to exist in complete harmony with new

²⁴ In this regard, see Anar’s story *The Morning of that Night*, published in translation by Azerbaijani international. The story focuses on the fear of people living in a five story apartment building as they hear a vehicle approach one night in 1937, while footsteps slowly climb the stairs. The footsteps in the end are revealed to belong to nurses from an ambulance, who have come to deliver a baby—who turns out to be the author. Anar’s most celebrated novel is *Tehmine ve Zaur*, the story of a weak-willed man who betrays his free-spirited lover for the sake of social decorum. Both of these works deal with repression in some

forms of state tyranny and ethnic violence. The kind of literature Aylišli practices, on contrast, has turned out to be by far the more searching and vital.

It would be interesting in this context to consider Safaly's conversations with Neil Armstrong, whose image appears in the depths of Safaly's ambivalent unconscious life, and with his elderly Armenian neighbor and friend Lora, who does not endorse the Karabagh movement, though she apparently has rational friends who do, and who manages to leave Baku before the events of January 1990. These conversations mark the points when Aylišli comes closest to dealing with the violence treated directly in *Stone Dreams*. In *Yemen*, this violence remains in the background for reasons that one can only speculate about. One thing is certain, however. Whatever the reason may have been, it was not cowardice; as noted, Aylišli had openly denounced the pogroms in Sumgait when they occurred (Ismayil 66). One should therefore seek an aesthetic explanation; that is, in the laws autonomous to this work of art.

To gather the thoughts and "beads" of this chapter and return to the concerns with which it began: *Yemen's* narrative form, scattered over the earth, belies Safaly's brief feeling that "everything is in its place."

Safaly *muallim* stood a little while in a corner looking stupidly at the sofa, nightstand, refrigerator, and television, and for the first time in his life he decided that nothing needed to be rearranged. Moreover, he even came to the extraordinary thoughtful philosophical conclusion that everything in the world was in its proper place: Khyzyr *kishi's* place was in Buzbulag, Taniel's was in Moscow, and Ali Ziya's was right there in the enormous resort cafeteria on that part of the veranda where people ate *shahlyk* and other fine foods.
(Aylišli, *Farewell* 16)

sense, and yet Anar has not spoken out against Azerbaijan's current government, nor about the atrocities committed against Armenians during the Nagorno-Karabagh war. Akram Aylišli has confirmed the relationship between Anar and Ali Ziya in our personal correspondence.

In fact, everything is “out of place” in *Yemen*: Faulkner is in Buzbulag, Buzbulag in Sana, Taniel’ is in Baku, and Ali Ziya is at Safaly’s door, if not inside his mind as his double or devil. The narrative enacts a series of contacts and identifications that show the uncanny presence of the world or “globe” in Safaly’s localized experience, a world in which a plurality of forces is at work. It is in this sense that it is possible to speak of *Yemen* as being “a global novel” even prior to its new translation into English, even prior to its being read on any noticeable scale. Written on the edge of the end of the Soviet Union in Azerbaijan, it contains a percept of the “global” as “a medium through which all kinds of stories can be told” (Kirsch 25), in a relationship where the localized and the global exist in dialectical tension, in such a way that both are displaced (Kirsch 102). The uncanny resemblance between Faulkner and Khyzyr *kishi* serves as an image of this as well as an emblem for the power of literature to reveal or suggest our nearest experiences regarding what is happening in our world. This power—the fantasy of a writer—contains more than a few unexplained secrets. Without any apparent intention on the author’s part, for example, *Yemen* creates the conditions for an implicit comparison between the impending war between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Civil War waged between North and South Yemen in the 1960’s, in which the presence of global forces was also present.²⁵ One must dwell on why this comparison, unintended and the result of chance, nevertheless works. Likewise, the writer’s fantasy has anticipated the future in an uncanny way. Indeed, the epigraph of the novel, particularly in the Russian, takes on a resonance it could not have possessed at the moment of writing, following the most recent humanitarian disaster in Yemen, where global forces have again waged war.

²⁵ I refer to the North Yemen Civil War (1962-1970), which pitted Republican forces supported by the USSR and Egypt against Royalist forces supported by America and the British.

*Dağdi, bağdi, çəməndi,
Hər şey həməh-həməndi
Bu dünya bir Yəməndi
Yəməndi, ay Safalı! (Aylisli, Yemen 193)*

*И пустошь здесь, и пустошь,
Куда ни глянь — повсюду то ж.
Весь мир на Йемен стал похож,
Сплошной Йемен, а Сафалы!*

*(Mountain, garden, pasture,
It's all the very same
The entire world is Yemen
It's Yemen, ay Safaly!)*

*And it's wasteland, and wasteland—
All around—is what you see.
The world starts to resemble Yemen,
Endless Yemen, eh, Safaly?
(Aylisli, Farewell 1)*

CHAPTER III
STONE DREAMS²⁶

As stated above, *Stone Dreams* is the book for which Aylisli is likely to be remembered. Likewise, one can assume that it is largely thanks to *Stone Dreams* that Aylisli has become a “global novelist” in the customary meaning of the term. In some ways, this title is misfortunate, however. The world does not treat its “global novelists” as it once did, at least not in the academy, where a rallying cry “Against World Literature” has been raised. Granted, this cry has been made, not against the sharing of literary texts across the globe in principle, but against the way the “World Literature” has been instituted as a discipline in the western academy. Be that as it may, the institution of World Literature is in large part correctly said to 1) favor the major literatures of Europe, 2) to be reliant on English translation, 3) to lead to the erasure of local difference and complexity, and 4) to conform to the logic of the UN, with one or two “representative” authors standing for their home countries.²⁷ Given the state of this institution—in which Azerbaijani literature does not even appear on the radar—Aylisli’s most recent works threaten to suffer a doubly ironic fate. Dismissed by the critics of the “global novel” as the poorer cousins of Orkhan Pamuk—an attitude that would ironically echo how they were greeted in Azerbaijan—these novels may not even be read by the “global novel’s”

²⁶ Parts of this chapter were delivered in a conference paper in Prague 2015. The proceedings of the conference were published as “Proceedings of IAC-SSaH 2015: International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities.”

²⁷ Kirsch discusses this effect in relation to Pamuk: “Indeed, Pamuk is a good example of what might be called the United Nations effect in world literature, whereby each country is allowed a single representative in the world’s literary consciousness. Just as Albanian literature, for instance, means Ismail Kadare to most foreign readers, so most readers who encounter Pamuk in translation would likely be hard-pressed to name a second living Turkish novelist” (29). There is a potentially interesting comparison to be made between Pamuk and Aylisli, in regards to their literary approach to the history of their respective homelands, the political reactions to their statements, and their relationship to Russian literature (Turgenev).

proponents, since Azerbaijani literature is perceived as “too foreign,” obscure, or unclassifiable.²⁸ The burden of this chapter is to show how *Stone Dreams* itself upsets the concepts that structure the institution of World Literature (i.e. the UN logic of representation) by undertaking an experimental reading of the novel as an effort towards a “minor literature,” or the literature a minority creates within a major language (Deleuze and Guattari 16); likewise, it tries to demonstrate that it is precisely as “minor literature” that *Stone Dreams* has universal relevance, or, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “is major.” For it expresses a poetic ethos threatening to the conformity implied by institutions as such.

Although the concept of “minor literature” was created by Deleuze and Guattari in response to the writing of Kafka, interpreting *Stone Dreams* in this way would not mean reading the novel as an imitation or in terms of its resemblance to Kafka’s work.²⁹ Nor would it mean trying to demonstrate that Aylisli set out with the intention of writing such a work. It would only mean experimenting with the question of how in his own circumstances Aylisli has made efforts to create “the revolutionary conditions for every literature at the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (Deleuze and Guattari 18). Deleuze and Guattari define the conditions of a minor literature by three characteristics. The first is that “language is affected by a high degree of

²⁸ Azerbaijani literary history is indeed extremely complex, situated at the historical crossroads of several major literary languages: Persian, Arabic, Turkic and Russian.

²⁹ In fact, this goes without saying. A closer literary precursor to *Stone Dreams* would be Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, where the protagonists are also actors. The *Satanic Verses* also contain a response to the Nellie Massacre, respond to life affected by Empire and its fall, and the scandalous dreams regarding the prophet are well known. “We are all guilty of Assam,” he said. “Each person of us. Unless and until we face it, that the children’s deaths were our fault, we cannot call ourselves a civilized people” (Rushdie 56). Aylisli has taken certain elements from Rushdie, and yet his work can hardly be called an imitation. His work is not sprawling, but succinct and focused; his actor is not a playboy, but a Don Quixote, while his dream occupies his entire life for the duration of the narrative, which ends at his death.

deterritorialization” (16); “the second characteristic of minor literatures is that in them everything is political” while the third is that “everything takes on collective value” (17).

This chapter will attempt an experimental reading of Aylisli’s novel in terms of these three characteristics in the hopes of telling the novel apart from the efforts that have been made to judge and vilify its author. This will involve discussing the artistic risks of *Stone Dreams* and asking how the novel is related to the processes of deterritorialization, how everything within it is political, and how everything in it takes on a collective value.

With regards to the text itself, *Stone Dreams: a novel-requiem* follows the fate of the “quixotic” Azerbaijani actor, Sadai Sadyqly, in the days leading up to “Black January” in Baku (-January 1990),¹ thus covering roughly the same time period as *Yemen*. The novel opens with a comatose Sadyqly being taken to the hospital by his personal “Sancho Panza,” the paunchy comic actor Nuvarish Karabaghli. Karabaghli implores the doctor, who has just returned to Baku from Moscow, to heal his friend, recounting how Sadyqly was nearly beaten to death because he tried to protect an elderly Armenian man from a group of angry Azerbaijani refugees, themselves probably recently expelled from Yerevan.¹ The novel unfolds with Sadyqly lying unconscious in the hospital; there, far away in sleep, he relives his life in dreams, beginning with dreams of his “radiant childhood” in Aylis, where he had marveled at the beauty of ruined Armenian churches and the enlightened kindness of the few Armenian women who visited or remained. In the company of his father-in-law, the renowned local philosopher and psychologist, Dr. Abasaliev, Sadyqly wanders through the ancient streets of Aylis and listens to stories about the massacre of the village’s Armenian population in 1919; he is also told of the

mental illnesses prevalent among the Azerbaijani families who took over their homes, said to be haunted by “ghosts,” “jinns” or “Nemesis” (Mamedov 2016).³⁰

The risks of the novel can be seen most clearly by the reception it was given in Azerbaijan. Much of this reaction has been narrated above, following Mamedov’s account of the “Stone Dreams scandal,” though it is worthwhile attending to the particular circumstances of *Stone Dreams*’ publication in more detail here (Mamedov 2014, 42-9). As Mamedov relates, Aylisli decided to publish *Stone Dreams* in response to public celebration of Azerbaijani army lieutenant Ramil Safarov, who was convicted in a Hungarian court (2004) for murdering Gurgun Magaryan, an Armenian lieutenant, while the two were participating in an English language program in Budapest. Later extradited to Azerbaijan (2012), Safarov was issued a full presidential pardon, was promoted to major, gifted a new apartment, and was publicly celebrated as a national hero, an avenger of wrongs suffered during the Nagorno-Karabagh War. As Aylisli tells the story, the shocking barbarity of these events is what convinced him to translate and publish *Stone Dreams*—a text he says he had initially written “for the drawer” in Azerbaijani in 2006—with the Russian journal *Druzhiba Narodov*. The irony of these events is that the outrage that met the publication of *Stone Dreams* came in response to Aylisli’s attempt to honor his people by showing that not everyone had succumbed to the murderous psychosis Safarov represented, remaining faithful to Azerbaijani’s own truly heroic, spiritual traditions, as indeed many had.

However, Mamedov acknowledges that the outrage aroused by the novel was to be expected, considering how certain of Aylisli’s characters speak of Islam, and more

³⁰ Mamedov points out how Aylisli invokes Nemesis, as the spirit that haunts those villagers who took over the homes of slaughtered Armenians in Aylis.

importantly, considering the fact that while Aylisli vividly represented the violence suffered by Armenians in Sumgait, Baku, and Aylis in his novel, he avoided representing crimes committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis, either during the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, or in the past. However, it is Mamedov's thesis that the outrage was not due to a biased representation of events. He rightly argues rather that the outrage arose because in representing the violence suffered by innocent Armenians in Sumgait and Baku and omitting representations of massacres committed against Azerbaijanis by Armenians, Aylisli touched on a taboo (Mamedov, "Scandal" 47).

While it is unlikely that Mamedov's article will be given a better welcome in Azerbaijan, the articles and interviews of the contributors to the special section of *Caucasus Survey*, where Mamedov's article was published, lend credibility to his arguments, if people take the time to read them. Thomas de Waal authors the introduction, interpreting *Stone Dreams* as an example of good, "iconoclastic" writing, skeptical of "national ideas and accepted shibboleths" (de Waal, "Dreams in Black Garden" 41). Ulvi Ismayil's "Sincerity, Truth, and Mercy in Action: the role of Akram Aylisli's *Stone Dreams* in revisiting and questioning Azerbaijani's views on their conflict with Armenians" demonstrates the consistency of Aylisli's literary work as a whole, much of which focuses on his native Aylis, and of his literary response to the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, which a close reading of *Yemen* also demonstrates (Ismayil 64-71). Emil Sanamyan's "Acknowledgement and praise: Armenian reactions to Akram Aylisli's novel *Stone Dreams*" indicates that while *Stone Dreams* has been used, inconsistently, by political provocateurs in Armenia, it has also been met by sincere appreciation (Sanamyan, "Acknowledgements and Praise" 60-63). Though they are likely to find a

great deal of resistance, these articles put forth valuable evidence that Aylisli's literary response to the conflict is a consistent one, that by not depicting historical crimes committed against Azerbaijanis by Armenians the author was not creating a biased account of history but writing as an iconoclast who risked touching socio-political taboos in Azerbaijani society. This view is not only reasonable—it is very difficult to say why else Aylisli, whom nobody can accuse of being ignorant of his own country's history, chose not to focus on the violence committed against Azerbaijanis in Armenia—it is also consistent with the text of the novel, and in particular, with those passages in which the author comes closest to speaking in the guise of his characters.

One such passage consists of a telephone conversation between Dr. Abbas Abasaliev, psychologist, philosopher, local historian and mentor of the novel's protagonist, and his daughter, *Azada khanum*, the wife of the protagonist, Sadai Sadyqly. *Azada khanum* calls her father when she fears for the sanity of her husband as she witnesses his reaction to the violence committed in the Sumgait pogroms. While the interpretation of the passage might seem straightforward, as it has not received a great deal of explicit attention, and as there is always a risk when it comes to controversial books that general opinion will be favored at the expense of the actual text, it deserves a close reading.

To provide the context, one night after the events in Sumgait a desire unexpectedly arises in Sadai Sadyqly's soul to travel to Echmiadzin in order to convert to Christianity with the blessing of the Armenian Catholicos and remain there as a monk praying for God to forgive Muslims for the evil they have committed against Armenians. Not knowing whether he was sleeping or waking when this fantastic idea came to him,

the next morning he reveals it to his wife Azada *khanum*, who even without this had serious worries about her husband's mental condition. She calls her father Dr. Abasaliev, whose hobby since his student days has been collecting facts and histories of his native Aylis. Without any special effort, Dr. Abasaliev gives the diagnosis of manic-depression, but surprised by the gravity of his diagnosis, he tries to turn everything into a joke by asking if Sadyqly wants to go perform a circumcision on the Catholicos. He then begins to speak about a diary written by an Armenian merchant from Aylis, of his own love for Aylis, which he calls the true house of god, in comparison to which Echmiadzin is, as he puts it, only a "snotty kid." Azada *khanum* replies:

Stop it, Papa! You turn everything into a joke," said Azada *khanum* in a slightly irritated voice. "He experiences the fate of every Baku Armenian painfully, as if he alone is obliged to protect them from every attack. Each and every Armenian has become dearer to him than he himself. As if they're all heavenly angels, and we're just butchers thirsting for their blood. He thinks only of those Armenians of Aylis and just can't understand that today's Armenians aren't much better than our own brainless screamers [этих наших безмозглых крикунов]. He simply can't forget the slaughter the Turks conducted in Aylis that he himself didn't see. It's you, Papa, who made him this way."

"No, my daughter, I've got almost nothing to do with this. From birth he was an honest, conscientious, and vulnerable person. And what today's Armenians are like is beside the point—the point is what we're like now. Sadai isn't interested in Armenians, past or present. He's only thinking about the ethnicity we share [Садаю нет дела до тех или нынешних армян. Он думает только о нашей с тобой нации.] Of course, you know how sincerely he loves his people—that's what distinguishes him from the ill-assorted, brainless screamers who've now multiplied around the world like mushrooms after rain." The Doctor paused for a long time. Then he started speaking in the warm and tender voice his daughter knew exquisitely well. "You've read Majnun and Layla, my daughter! Remember what Majnun does when the army of his tribe goes to the last assault against the army of the tribe of Leyla's father. You know that war was started to punish Layla's cruel father, who didn't want to give his daughter to a person from another tribe. And Majnun, blinded by love for his Layla, pitying her father, at the decisive moment throws himself into helping the enemy army. Because that's what true love [подлинная любовь] is. True love doesn't know any boundaries. You can love a woman that way, and also a motherland [Родину]. That kind of love is a clean mirror, my daughter—only goodness and mercy are reflected in it. It doesn't come from life, but from God. That's what ails him, our Majnun. And

how wonderful, my little girl, that the medicine to treat that illness still hasn't been found," concluded Dr. Abasaliev with tears in his voice, acknowledging his powerlessness in the situation.

Then Dr. Abasaliev lectured his daughter about Aylis for almost an hour on the phone. And that phone conversation not only didn't soothe Azada *khanum*, but increased her alarm still further. She as in utter dismay; it seemed to her that all the men around her were beginning bit by bit to lose their minds. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 100-1)³¹

If nothing else, the passage demonstrates Aylisli's foresight. Azada *khanum*'s complaint that her husband suffers like a sickness the fate of each Armenian in Baku as if he alone were obligated to save them from any attack, that for him any Armenian has become dearer than he is to himself, as if they were heavenly angels and we—Azerbaijanis—were only blood thirsty executioners, echoes in advance how many Azerbaijanis blamed *Stone Dreams* for representing Armenians as innocent victims with Azerbaijanis playing the role of murderers and aggressors. At the same time, this passage is one of the few that makes an allusion to violence committed against Azerbaijanis in Nargorno-Karabagh and Armenia, where vast numbers of Azerbaijanis had been violently forced to flee and seek refuge in places like Sumgait.³² Azada *khanum* says that Sadyqlly only thinks about the Armenians from his old Aylis and cannot understand at all that today's Armenians are no better than our Azerbaijani brainless loudmouths.

Dr. Abasaliev's response to his daughter is interesting because it speaks not only in defense of Sadyqlly but also perhaps towards the artistic purpose of the novel and its avoidance of representing violence committed against Azerbaijanis by Armenians. He

³¹ The Russian text can be found in *Druzhba Narodov* (Aylisli, *Kamennye* 26-28).

³² Azada *khanum* (khanum is a title of respect for women in Azerbaijan, meaning "Lady," or literally, "my khan") mentions these crimes in another conversation with her father, cited below. There is also a suicide note that seems to have been forged by Shahgajar, a cruel individual from Shusha, on behalf of his murdered, Armenian neighbor, in which the shameful crimes committed by her people are repented of. The word "yerazi," a pejorative term for Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia, is used several times by the character Nuvarish Karabaghli.

says that it is not a matter of what kind of people today's Armenians have become but in who we—Azerbaijanis—are now. To clarify, he says that the Armenians of the past or the Armenians of today are not Sadai's business. He thinks only of our nation and yours. Dr. Abasaliev says that Sadai loves his people sincerely, and that by this alone he differentiates himself from the brainless loudmouths who have sprung up today all over the world like mushrooms after the rain. According to Dr. Abasaliev, Sadai and *Stone Dreams* itself are not really concerned at all with judging Armenians or with weighing crimes in a balance, with washing away the blood that was spilled here with the blood that was spilled there, but with what is happening in Azerbaijan itself out of a sincere love for his birthplace and for the fate of its people. Though it is not likely to be granted a great deal of attention by those who read the novel as an extension of the ideological struggle for territory, it does present a consistent interpretation of the novel's artistic purpose and the absence of scenes depicting violence committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis. Demonizing a group of people based on their ethnic identity, even if they have been militarily aggressive and a certain number of those people at one time did commit crimes that continue to have effects seems only to authorize further crime, eliminate critical and creative thought, and give rise to what Aylisli calls "an atmosphere of pugilistic moralizing and lack of spirituality" (Burtin 76).

After a prolonged pause, Dr. Abasaliev explains himself by making reference to Nizami's dastan *Layla and Majnun*, telling his daughter to remember what Majnun, the poet, madman, and ideal lover, does when an army from his tribe goes on a last attack against the army of the tribe of Layla's father. The war, he says, began with the purpose of punishing the cruel father of Layla, who did not want to give his daughter away to a

man from another tribe. But Majnun, blinded by love for his Layla, and pitying her father at the most crucial moment threw himself to the defense of the enemy army. As Dr. Abasaliev explains, this is because it was original love, which doesn't know borders, which doesn't come from life, but from god. A person can love a woman like this, or a homeland, like a pure mirror where only kindness and mercy appear. That is Sadai's sickness, and Dr. Abasaliev is thankful that no one has found any medicine for it. The conversation, which it is said confesses Dr. Abasaliev's helplessness in the situation, fails to console *Azada khanum*, who begins to think that all the men around her are secretly losing their minds.

Although it may seem straight forward, the parallel that Dr. Abasaliev draws between Majnun and Sadyqly must be interpreted, especially because it constitutes an interpretation of a strange episode from Layla and Majnun that has not received much attention. An Azerbaijani reader might ask what does a story of ideal love have to do with the dirty reality and politics behind the story of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict? In both stories it is clear that the protagonist begins to fight on behalf of another tribe—but whereas Majnun does so because the love he has for a woman of the other tribe is a divine madness that comes from God, Dr. Abasaliev says that Sadyqly does so because he sincerely loves his homeland and his people. He is like a pure mirror in which only kindness and mercy appear. He has a tender, spiritual love for the homeland of his childhood, which could not have been what it was without an Armenian presence, without the people he knew or the landscape they shaped. Dr. Abasaliev seems to ask if the innocent blood that was spilled in one place will hide the innocent blood that was spilled in another, if the crimes committed in one place excuse or mitigate the crimes that

have been committed in another, if one the loudmouth of one place silences the loudmouth of another. Seeing this simple question become incomprehensible as a result of what is happening around him—the rise of ethnic violence, nationalism, and political opportunism accompanied by “an atmosphere of pugilistic moralizing and lack of spirituality,”—Sadyqly cannot help but despair, nor can his story fail to be touching, as Don Quixote’s, even if it is surrounded by farce.³³

The passage seems to offer a consistent interpretation of both Sadyqly’s character and of the absence of representations of violence against Azerbaijanis in *Stone Dreams*. The author had reason to avoid making even the appearance of a pact with the ruling forces of nationalism and ethnic hatred that do exist and that have not failed to shape his country, allying himself rather with the traditions of intelligence, sublime love, mercy and kindness, which also exist and cannot fail to shape his country. In this context it is important to recall how the actions of Sadyqly were not an aberration in Sumgait and Baku during the pogroms that were organized there. Many Azerbaijanis at that time are said to have helped to protect and hide their Armenian neighbors until they could escape.³⁴ It would be a shame if this important piece of historical truth touched upon in the novel were buried at the expense of the history written by those who have managed to profit enormously, for now, as a result of the war and the atrocities that were committed.

To focus on this might seem like putting a great deal of importance on a very small detail in the context of the extremely complicated past and future history of Azerbaijani-Armenian relations, an account of which goes beyond the scope of this thesis. But it is a detail that is symptomatic of an effort to write towards a minor

³³ The farce that I refer to here are the political threats and demonstrations against Aylišli.

³⁴ Conversations with an Azerbaijani friend.

literature, that is, an artistic effort to bring something new into being, to create the revolutionary conditions for all literature at the heart of what is called great or established literature, to write another version of events that have been written in bodies, in blood, then in borders, in laws, and then in histories by people on both sides of the conflict, if it is appropriate to speak of sides in this debacle.

To illustrate, I would like to relate a conversation that I had with an Azerbaijani student about Mamedov's article in 2015, when I was working as a teacher of writing at Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, in the hopes of making Ayisli's artistic effort more legible. The student was part of a class that was assigned to read and write a critical analysis of the article. Along with the overwhelming majority of his classmates, this particular young man, a good student, very intelligent and responsible, strongly disagreed with Mamedov's arguments. He believed, without any evidence, that Ayisli had been paid to write *Stone Dreams*, which he condemned for the possible effects it might have on the ideological struggle between Azerbaijan and Armenia. When I asked this young man to respond to Mamedov's arguments on this topic—i.e. if *Stone Dreams* had been written by an Armenian it would have been taken as another example of ideological warfare, but as an Azerbaijani authored work it is a novel of repentance and perhaps a gesture towards reconciliation (Mamedov, "Scandal" 49)—the student spontaneously began explaining his view of what happened in places like Khojayli and in Sumgait. In essence, he said that the massacres were not simply acts of rage but intended as demonstrations or signs meant to stake out a territory, to say that a certain people do not belong here and that they must see what will happen if they come back. When I asked this student, if this is so, how could he condemn one such action and not the other, he said

that Aylishi's book told the truth in some way, but that it was not the right time and that these things should not be revealed until the ideological struggle with Armenia over the territory of Nagorno-Karabagh is won in the international arena.

It is not certain that this student's views about the nature of the pogroms will be accepted by historians or political scientists, nor that they are representative of the opinion of most Azerbaijani's. There are many theories in Azerbaijan about the events in Sumgait and Baku, some of which have been officially endorsed by the Azerbaijani government.³⁵ A more credible source, Thomas de Waal's *Black Garden* is suggestive, for example, when it shows how the conditions in Sumgait in 1989 contributed to the organized violence that erupted there, and which was allowed to continue for an entire day before any measures were taken to halt it (de Waal, *Black Garden* 29-45). Interestingly enough, *Stone Dreams*, which does not directly represent the violence in Sumgait, does speak of the different theories of the event. Azada *khanum* urges her husband Sadai Sadyqly to believe that it was the KGB who instigated the violence and that she cannot believe Azerbaijanis could commit such atrocities. At the same time she does not fail to mention the violent crimes committed in Armenia, which provided the motive for retaliation, the violence that Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh brought with them to Sumgait after a movement had arisen around their homes in Nagorno-Karabagh to redraw the borders between the two countries, borders that had been drawn and redrawn by forced relocations according to the interests and designs of "the churches, races, and armies" of the past.³⁶ Sadai Sadyqly, however, is not convinced

³⁵ See the site of the General Azerbaijani Prosecutor. <http://www.prokurorluq.gov.az/sumgayit>

³⁶ "For everyone's life begins on a level where races, armies, and churches stop. And yet everyone's life is always shaped by races, churches, and armies" (Baldwin 149)

by his wife's words, citing their mutual knowledge of what human beings are capable of. The violent writing of borders by both groups and individuals as they attempt to reterritorialize a land and a people on a new nation state by means of atrocity belongs to the fate, the tragic perception and experience, of Aylisli's hero Sadai Sadyqly.

Sadyqly's fate and experience announce themselves in dreams that come to him in the days that precede his death. The dreams bring back his idyllic childhood in Aylis with its human community, its divine light, its landscape, its twelve ruined Armenian churches, and the violent past that is still in memory. When the violence that was to break out in Baku in January 1990 approaches, Sadyqly's dark presentiments of the future also appear within these dreams, as the being of his childhood, his spiritual life and values, are threatened with destruction and when in his real life he meets with the demonic forces from the future that come knocking at the door.³⁷

The high, white walls of the church that appeared to Sadai in the dream had cracked from inside, and that could be seen filtering into the church through the cracks that had formed. A sound resembling the hum of a swarm of bees streamed without stopping, a sound bringing horror with it, pouring directly into the church as if from some entirely different world and from there—through the cracked walls—hurrying with diabolical passion to spread the terrible news it brought around the world.

And from that time that strange, unearthly sound followed Sadai without stopping. From the radio—from the television screen—from the revolutionary, religious, and various patriotic leaflets stuck here and there on the wall of the entryways and telephone poles—from the headlines of articles black with large letters on the front pages of newspapers and journals—from everywhere the artist heard that lightsound [светозвук] sowing unprecedented horror around the world. It was incomprehensible to him why, at just this moment when it would seem that no one was afraid of anything, he had to live with the continual sensation of fear. Why, in every word read in the newspaper and heard on the radio, on the television, from the lips of the orators on the squares and the women on the streets, did he hear a portent of tragedy? Why did his heart darken at the sight of

³⁷"The creative line of escape vacuums up in its movement all politics, all economy, all bureaucracy, all judiciary: it sucks them like a vampire in order to make them render still unknown sounds that come from the near future—Fascism, Stalinism, Americanism, diabolical powers that are knocking at the door" (Deleuze and Guattari 41).

pregnant women or young couples walking in the parks and on the Boulevard? Was it possible that it fell only to him to fear for the future of all people? What had so frightened him once that he now walked in horror at the thought that that roar of the streets and squares sooner or later would bring a new Master to power? Why exactly was he, Sadai Sadygly, fated to experience the pain and suffering of inevitable bloodshed now, before it had happened? [Почему именно ему, Садаю Садыглы, суждено уже сейчас испытывать боль и страдания от неминуемого кровопролития?] (Aylisli, *Farewell* 123-4)³⁸

Sadai Sadygly's experience and fate, his madness and death, are those of a witness to the events of January 1990, even though he dies before the events actually take place. As the violence of the event approaches, every word he reads in journals or hears in conversation begins to speak to him of an impending tragedy, a diabolical power he first experienced in his dreams, linked with the sound of destruction, the humming of a swarm that shakes within the walls of an Armenian church that stands as a vision of his childhood.

The impending violence that Sadygly feels affecting the language all around him is the same as the violence that will accompany the drawing up of national borders. The pogroms immediately preceded the events of 20 January when Soviet tanks entered Baku and which resulted in another massacre which has become part of the political foundation of the state of Azerbaijan.³⁹ They followed the demonstrations that arose in Nagorno-Karabagh to redraw the borders between the two countries and the violence against Azerbaijanis and Armenians that accompanied it. In other words, what Sadygly feels is how the world around him, the city of Baku, but also the past and the future that he

³⁸ For the Russian, see *Druzhba Narodov* (Aylisli, *Kamennye* 47-48).

³⁹ "Many newly independent states usually have the need to generate a strong national identity—which, in some cases, was non-existent or weak before independence—that directly relate to the state apparatus and symbols, thus legitimizing and strengthening them. The generation of a strong national identity will thus be the other side of the coin shared with governance, resources and rule of law, as they are all mutually constituting and necessary for the success of the state. A consistent and strong national identity—represented by several discourses, symbols, events, "myths" and institutions—allows the identification of a diverse society with itself and—more importantly—with the state..." (Gerbasio 2-3).

considers to be his own, is affected by a high degree of deterritorialization. The city of Baku that he knew is about to lose most of its ethnic diversity as a result of violence as the powers that surround the city prepare to vie for its control, to reterritorialize it. It is interesting that, corresponding to the machinery of the events of January 1990, Sadyqly encounters a more literal writing machine that comes to issue new statements and orders. He encounters the authors of a new regime of statements who will draw up a form of writing that is equally destructive of the being of his past, of his values, and of any desirable future—namely, the writing inspired by political opportunism and historical revision that accompanies the violent purges and that seeks to profit as a result of the contest over territorial borders.

This form of writing is parodied in the novel by Sadai Sadyqly's childhood friend Babash, who appears to Sadyqly as another manifestation of eternal evil (Aylisli 2012, 48). Babash, who was present when Sadyqly had his childhood vision of divine light in Aylis, and who may be in a position to help another childhood friend, writes an article in which he strikes Armenians from the history of Aylis. Sadyqly is introduced to the article in a conversation with his theater director, Maupassant Miralamov, who wants him to act in a new play written in conformity with those who are just about to come into power at the expense of those who are losing power (Aylisli 2012, 64-5). It is the perception of this madness wherein the violence of a pogrom becomes allied with the writing of new articles and plays, an encounter with the demonic forces of the future that are knocking at the door, that drives Sadyqly to despair, as it is so contrary to his own values and style of expression. It is worthwhile attending to this confrontation, since, in a way that recalls

Safaly's dialogues with Ali Ziya, it depicts Aylisli's engagement with literary forces within Azerbaijan which his English readership is not likely to know.

The confrontation between Babash and Sadyqly takes place over the telephone, when Sadyqly calls Ziyadov to seek his aid on behalf of a suffering childhood friend.

"Fine, send him over, I'll see him." Then he was silent again and, with ill-disguised injury in his voice, added, "I thought you phoned to congratulate me."

With those words Babash hung up the phone, while the artist stood with the receiver in his hand, looking uncomprehendingly at Maupassant Miralamov.

"Did you hear? He says, 'You didn't congratulate me.' What was I supposed to congratulate him for?"

"I don't know..." muttered the director thoughtfully, not lifting his eyes from the telephone. "A big article came out in yesterday's *Kommunist*. Probably he's thinking of that." (Aylisli, *Farewell* 134)

A few pages later, after arguing with the Maupassant Mirolamov, who wants him to act in a new play written to flatter new authorities in Baku, Sadyqly returns to the topic.

"I've been meaning to ask, but I forgot. You said Babash Ziyadov wrote an article. What did he write in it? Is it possible that he, too, is denouncing the former First Person?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, it seems it's not about the former First Person. On the other hand, your fellow villager really sticks it to the Armenians." [...]

It was a long article, occupying a whole page of the newspaper *Kommunist*.

In the center was a headline composed of giant black letters: "The Vile Armenian Trail," and at the end stood the name of the author—"Babakhan Ziyadkhanly."

Even without his glasses, Sadai Sadyqly could make out the phrases "ungrateful people," "treacherous people," and "dangerous enemy" highlighted in thick type and scattered generously throughout the article. He was ready to set the paper aside when his glance came across the word "*Istazyn*" [i.e. Astvatsadun, the most ancient of Aylis' Armenian churches, said to be an exact duplicate of the cathedral of Etchiadzin], and then, putting on his glasses, he began to read the whole article.

Before this, the artist had encountered similar appalling vulgarity only, perhaps, in trashy, pseudopopulist articles by newly minted historians and hack writers who'd fallen into full senility. It was clearly apparent from the article that Babash had read an abundance of those kinds of compositions.

According to Babash Ziyadov, the word *Istazyn* originally meant *usta ozan* ("master" or "preacher"), and Armenians had deliberately distorted it in converting it to their own language, allegedly to erase the traces of the indigenous

inhabitants of that land from history. Those same *usta ozans*, he said, had migrated from mountainous Aylis to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers three thousand years before our era—that is, the plains, the *sum er*—and created a state there that was called *Sumer* in their language, thus giving birth to an ancient civilization, now well-known under the name Sumerian.

According to “Babakhan Ziyadkhanly,” the word Aylis was formed from the word *ailaj*, meaning “place of settlement.” It was as if Armenians had never lived in Aylis and all the churches and cemeteries had earlier been named *giur od* (wild flame) in the mythical “Odar” language so revered by pan-Turkists—in short, that these had been the lands of ancient Turkic peoples better known as Albanians. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 141-42)

The passage parodies the kind of mythological thinking practiced by some proponents of pan-Turkism in Azerbaijan. According to this way of “thinking,” what are universally considered to be monuments of Armenian culture on Azerbaijani soil—i.e. the church of *Istazyn/Astvatsadun*—are refashioned by reference to a mythical language, like “Odar” (“non-Armenian”), into Albanian (i.e. Azerbaijani, Turkic ancestors), for *usta ozan* is Azerbaijani Turkic for “master bard/preacher.” Together with the outright destruction of Armenian churches and Khachkars in Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, which has been well-documented since the Nagorno-Karabagh War,¹ this sort of thinking has served to imaginatively “purge” Azerbaijani soil of its historical difference, “purifying” Azerbaijani identity, even as it falsifies that identity.

Aylisli’s hero rightly dismisses Babash’s article as “trashy”; likewise, he recognizes how the article is saturated with the influence of “pseudo-populist” and “newly-minted historians,” a oxymoronic metaphor which points out the connection between this discourse and state power, as “newly-minted history” connotes a history-less, official currency. Indeed, as fantastic as they may be, comparable ideas have been affirmed by members of the Azerbaijani establishment. The prototype being parodied in the figure of Babash Ziyadov is probably none other than the Ziya Buniatov, whose book

Azerbaijan in the VII-IX Centuries (1965) lent credit to much of this kind of “thinking,” although it must be said that Babash represents a general type of conformist intellectual.

It is by virtue of Sadai Sadyqly’s perception of a unity between the forces of violence that will purge a city of most of its ethnic diversity and the authors of new plays and articles who will write for the new regimes, such as Babash and Miralamov, that *Stone Dreams* can be considered to be an effort to write towards a minor literature. The book contains an analysis of the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that simultaneously affect the geography of the earth and the language of people. The force of these processes extended into the writing and publication of *Stone Dreams* itself, which is banned in Azerbaijan and which had to be published first in a Russian translation, before being published in English, such that it could not help but be affected by a high degree of deterritorialization. As one who has attempted to chronicle the violence of these processes in terms of his homeland and as one who records what is either ignored or destroyed by the forces that animate and profit from these processes, Aylisli manages to get on paper a kind of minor writing that continues to have a revolutionary force.

Along with showing how the language of *Stone Dreams* is affected by a high degree of deterritorialization, it is also necessary to show how everything in it is political and how everything in it takes on collective value. These two characteristics might also seem obvious due to the controversy that surrounds the novel. However, it is precisely for this reason that the effort of thought must make certain distinctions.

The psychological state into which Sadyqly falls is not simply that of a private individual for whom the social background would be incidental.⁴⁰ It is in this sense, where the novel becomes the people's concern, that everything in it is political. In other words, it is a sickness of the soul that cannot be treated as part of a purely individual concern and as a consequence cannot be cured by drugs.

Dr. Abasaliev, who understood quite well that such psychological conditions are not at all a medical problem, tried to calm his daughter.

"It's cryptomnesia," he said. "It's found in all emotional people; as they age, they 'fall into childhood.' Don't be alarmed. One way or another, everyone lives his life [так или иначе каждый проживает свою жизнь].

But the sad thing [беда] was precisely that Sadai Sadygly wasn't living his life now. It was strange: Sadai Sadygly, in whose family there was no one with a drop of Armenian blood (one of his grandfathers had made a pilgrimage to Karbala, the other to Mecca), for some time had apparently carried within himself a kind of nameless Armenian. More precisely, hadn't carried but hidden. [Точнее, не носил, а скрывал]. And with every Armenian beaten, offended, and killed in that giant city, it was as if he himself had been beaten, offended, and killed. Since the beginning of autumn he probably hadn't smiled once, and he'd walked around dispirited and gloomy. He completely forgot the theater, where earlier he'd come at least twice a week. Even rallies, which at one time he gladly attended, lost all interest for him now. He felt restless in town and didn't know any peace at home.

One of those windy, rainy evenings he came home in such a state that Azada *khanum* almost shrieked in horror. It was as if someone had plunged him into a pool—all his clothes were wet, and water was pouring from his hair and his chin and from the pockets of his raincoat. His pants were smeared with filth; the buttons on his jacket and shirt collar had been torn off. (Aylisli, Farewell 124-5)⁴¹

One way or another everyone has to live through his own life, says Dr. Abasaliev, speaking of how his son-in-law has become absorbed in his own past. But, the narrative continues, the disaster lay precisely in that Sadai Sadyqly was not living his own life. It was strange: Sadai Sadyqly, in whose family there was not a drop of Armenian blood, for

⁴⁰ "In major literatures [...] the individual concern (family, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background [...] Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics" (Deleuze and Guattari 17).

⁴¹ For the Russian, see *Druzhba Narodov* (Aylisli, *Kamennye* 48)

some time it was as if he had carried inside himself a nameless Armenian. Or to be more exact, had not carried, but hidden. In a way that cannot be verified medically, Sadai Sadyqly suffers the fate of the Armenians who were beaten or killed in the violence. His problems are not those of an isolated individual for whom the social background is incidental. The whole of the social, its chaos and organization, permeates Sadai Sadyqly's whole life.

Everything is political, to the extent that the debacle of the world flows through him in the form of an indistinct and nauseating mass that he no longer wants to be a part of. Everything is political to the extent that he does not live his own life but lives the life and death of a nameless Armenian inside. Everything in Aylisli's novel is political, and at the same time everything in it was "politicized" according to another, politically reactionary logic, probably because what the author brought into being can only be codified in the contemporary regime by means of violence. When it is said that Sadyqly feels as if he were carrying a nameless Armenian inside himself, this would certainly constitute one of the taboos touched upon by the novel. Creating the artistic conditions for a zone of in-distinction between a nameless Armenian and an Azerbaijani is something that cannot be tolerated by the logic that governs the contemporary life organized between the two nations. The novel clearly enunciates a politics that becomes all the more essential because it is not active in life.⁴² So when because of the nature of this enunciation a member of the government in Azerbaijan asks that Aylisli's DNA be tested, it is clear that a diabolical, reactionary, brutal and violent logic is being applied.

When something does not conform to this brutal, binary logic, when it touches on a

⁴² See Deleuze and Guattari "...because collective or national consciousness is "often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down," literature finds itself charged with the role and function of a collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation" (17).

taboo—something sacred or forbidden lying at the origin of how social life has been organized—it is dealt with by means of violence and brutality.

Speaking of the brutal logic that has been applied to his book to “politicize” it according to reactionary logic that governs both states, Aylisli has said,

What they want is that if I write two good words about Armenians, then I have to write three about Azerbaijanis. I didn't set out to preserve some balance in opinion! I write about human beings, how they react to things—in this case an emotionally fragile man, whom this life has almost driven over the edge. And who takes it all so badly because he remembers the tales told in his village. I wrote about the tragedy of his spiritual isolation, when everything around him is moving against his values, his vision for the future. Brothers, let's face it—we did some awful things... This acknowledgement is the only way to start out and create something better. The devil is in those people who talked about checking my DNA, although they know perfectly well that I'm a Turk [turok] through and through. Or that I wanted a Nobel Prize, as if I was trading wares in a bazaar. But the worst thing is that they said these things in the name of the people. Some comfortable bureaucrat teaches me what the people think. If I had a doubt, if I suspected that I had in some way humiliated my people, I'd be a broken man. But as I am absolutely certain that I only lifted my nation up, that keeps me going. (Burtin 73)

Although there may be meaningful differences, the reaction against Aylisli in Azerbaijan resembles the experience of Philip Roth in America in the 1960s when he also wrote to touch on taboos to explore human nature. It constitutes a collective enunciation of a politics that is all the more essential because it is not active in real life. And although a brutal “politicizing” logic was applied to the novel's interpretation by the state and then by masses of people, calling the book an actual transgression that deserves to be punished, it is hard to imagine how a transgression could be more innocent. It is the innocence of this kind of collective, creative expression that Aylisli speaks of at the close of his interview with Shura Burtin, also published in the special section of the *Caucasus Survey*.

When I was young, I wrote mostly to please girls. Then I began to enjoy it, and I became a young hack. Early on, I think all young hacks are imitating someone, we haven't truly found ourselves yet, we don't yet look at the world completely through our own eyes. But then you connect with some universal human network of moral power, from which all artists draw their energy. It's funny to say, but I don't actually enjoy writing. But what can you do? How can you find relief? It ends up pulling on your soul, it becomes unbearable, you have to give birth. (78)

To return to the question with which this chapter began, this “universal network of moral power, from which all artists draw their energy,” represents Aylisli’s thought of “world literature.” It is an old-fashioned idea in many ways.⁴³ Nevertheless, it is worth considering in the context of how “World Literature” has been institutionalized, i.e. according to the literary commodification of national identities. Aylisli’s work questions this logic, since its “universal moral power,” the power of artistic creation, involves the recognition of a difference internal to any identity.

⁴³ It very much recalls Goethe’s idea that poetry is the possession of all mankind, expressing itself in hundreds and hundreds of men.

CHAPTER III

A FANTASTICAL TRAFFIC JAM

In distinction to *Yemen* and *Stone Dreams*, the Russian version of *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* is not immediately available outside of English. The reason for this also deserves particular attention. In 2011, fifty copies of the Russian translation of Aylisli's non-traditional novel in three parts, *Yemen*, *Stone Dreams*, and *A Fantastical Traffic Jam*, were privately published in Baku, and thereupon were immediately suppressed. The outraged response that the book elicited among Azerbaijani authorities following "The Stone Dream Scandal" meant that the final volume of Aylisli's novel—*A Fantastical Traffic Jam*—would hardly see daylight outside English translation; it could not be published in Azerbaijani, for obvious reasons, and the projected publication of the Russian translation in the journal *Druzhiba narodov* was cancelled due to pressure from the Azerbaijani government. As a result, apart from one short extract, the authorized text of *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* can generally be obtained today only in English and—as a small print run—in Latvian translation, both of which were based on the author's Russian translations of his work.⁴⁴

In a certain sense, these translations confirm Damrosch's contention that, "far from inevitably suffering a loss of authenticity or essence, a work can gain in many ways" by leaving the space of "national literature" and entering the sphere of "world literature" (Damrosch 6). In the case of Aylisli, it is only in translation that his "novel-requiems" recuperate the history of their own "trial by fire" and come accompanied by

⁴⁴ Thanks to Katherine Young, I have been able to obtain a copy of the original Russian to compare with the English translation.

the author's powerful reflections on the experience in the afterword, "Farewell, Aylis."⁴⁵ Far from detracting from authenticity, translation here testifies to the legitimacy and integrity of Aylisli's writing, as well as its ability to communicate across a border of oppressive political and psychological silence; few things speak to a book's truth as much as being denounced and banned by a dictatorial regime that promotes *poshlost*, meaninglessness, and falsification, like so many so-called democratic regimes, by the way. On the other hand, precisely because *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* has acquired what Cornel West might call the "problematic" status of a "global novel," one shouldn't lose sight of the fact that such gains go hand in hand with catastrophe, and at the price of the writer's resolve to confront it in language.⁴⁶ That is, when reading *Farewell, Aylis* one shouldn't ignore the personal catastrophe that continues to beset the author and his work (Aylisli cannot leave Azerbaijan, while his novel cannot appear there in its original language); nor should one forget how both are connected to the historical catastrophes of the Armenian genocide, the Soviet Union's fall, the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, and the subsequent reorganization of Azerbaijan into an oil-rich, "post-soviet" dictatorship, all of which the author undertakes to address in his most recent books.

Indeed, Aylisli heralds catastrophe in the bitter irony of the title of his second "novel-requiem," *A Fantastical Traffic Jam*.⁴⁷ A prominent symbol of industrialized, urban life, the "traffic jam" in context refers most immediately to the scene described at

⁴⁵ I dwell on "Farewell, Aylis" in the conclusion of this thesis.

⁴⁶ I am taking the words "problem" and "catastrophe" from a lecture delivered by Cornel West at the University of Oregon in 2019. There he criticized the academy's penchant for problems (which presuppose distance and possible technical solutions) to catastrophes, for which cannot be made present and in a certain sense cannot be overcome. The idea is similar to what Blanchot evokes in his book *The Writing of Disaster*.

⁴⁷ Azerbaijani: *Möhtəşəm tıxac: roman-rekviem*

the end of the book; there, after having orchestratedated the death of his lifelong underling Elbey and after discovering an unflattering portrayal of himself in the diary of his personal servant/chef Tray, the anonymous dictator (born January 20th 19....)⁴⁸ causes a traffic emergency by lingering over his disquieting dreams instead of returning as scheduled from his dacha to the city via the roads an army of policemen has cordoned off for him.

On the unholy day that followed, the Master, having planned to be at work at twelve-thirty, suddenly changed his mind a half-hour before leaving the dacha, delaying his departure for a whole hour. Panic began in the one-hundred-strong squad of highway police. Because automobile traffic from the Old Dacha to the Seat of Power had been completely stopped forty minutes ago, and now the army of traffic cops didn't know how to deal with the thoroughly gridlocked city transportation system.

The chaos became monstrous, creating a traffic state of emergency in the city. The ceaseless honking of horns mixed with the barking of police megaphones, the glass shook in building windows, the men's and women's underwear spread out to dry on the balconies fluttered bashfully in the wind. The street dogs all hid in the bushes, and the cats in the houses crawled under the bed. Even the *plov* being prepared in the homes of well-heeled citizens lost its taste. [...]

During the course of a half-hour, thirteen drivers and the same number of bus passengers experienced heart attacks. More than one hundred people suffering from psychiatric disorders were transported, some to the police, some to the asylum. In a word, the unexpected order of the Master entirely changed the city dwellers' customary way of life. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 262)

This violent interruption results from the capricious Master's brooding over a dream (to which we will return in more detail below): he dreams of his father trying to catch and cook a crimson rooster that threatens to defecate all over him from the height of a flowering apricot tree, an image that finds its adequate reflection in the "colossal mess" of reality.⁴⁹ Because of the traffic jam, a crack threatens to develop in the structure of the state, and the narrative—splitting in several directions at once to survey the cityscape—

⁴⁸ The date clearly refers to Black January, though the year is not indicated.

⁴⁹ At one point, Katherine Young seems to have played with the idea of translating Aylisli's title this way.

withdraws from the lives of its main characters to sweep over a number of less conspicuous deaths that have occurred in the midst of the chaos. Recalling the Master's dream, rumors circulate that the head of the police "shat himself in his car," causing his driver to fall unconscious and block traffic.⁵⁰ While some drivers resign themselves to waiting patiently for the jam to clear, others grow nervous; and still others see "a spark of future popular good fortune in that bedlam," giving themselves up surreptitiously—the narrator intervenes—"to dreams about the inevitable end of the regime, clean forgetting the simple rule of contemporary history: what appears outrageous today will be accepted as the ordinary way of things tomorrow" (Aylisli 2018, 262).

Meanwhile, a minor character from the novel, Nizam Shamistan, a KGB agent turned academic who has gotten stuck on his way to a ceremonial for the "Year's Best Novelist," passes his time by conversing with his taxi driver.

In Arabic he poured forth the chapters of the Quran. In Russian he cursed the former leaders of the Popular Front. He declaimed long poems, recounted frivolous anecdotes. In the end he got to the point that the taxi driver was certain this person was from the state security organs, from *There*.

"For the love of God, Nizam *muallim*, please speak a little more softly. Really, I'm not deaf," said the driver, risking attracting the anger of the learned passenger.

The academic from *There* probably didn't even hear the taxi driver's request because his thoughts were occupied with a prognosis of political development in the country, and he'd already marked this traffic confusion for himself as proof of the paralysis of authority.

"A traffic jam! A fantastical traffic jam!" exclaimed the inspired academic. And he added, equally fervently, "You could name a novel that. A *Fantastic-cal Traffic Jam*. It sounds great, doesn't it?" Turning his face towards the driver who was suffering from his talkative presence, he announced ardently, "That novel might have astounding success! They could even give the author a Nobel Prize. But we don't truly have real novelists. And those we have give their pitiful writing stupid names: *Blue Sea*, or *Hot Sun*. Or *Sword and Quill*, *Zaur and Ziba*... You have to give a good work a sonorous name. Our writers don't understand that. Because all of them are complete idiots. And their bravery doesn't go farther than the red underwear of their Armenian wives—"

⁵⁰ Aylisli 2018, 262

Intending to buttress his argument with another chapter from the Quran so that the taxi driver wouldn't have any further doubt about the fact that he himself was a leading theorist in the genre of the novel, Nizam Shamistan discovered that the driver wasn't in his place [...] (Aylisli, *Farewell* 264)

The run-away driver, a refugee from Agdam (Karabagh) with “a great deal of experience in making hasty getaways” (Aylisli 2018, 264), has in fact abandoned his car in fear, cursing his talkative passenger and old Zhiguli at the same time. Taking leave of the stunned scholar by assigning his speech “to the genre of political masturbation,” the narrative dips into a bar with the driver and listens to the verses of an opposition poet before moving on to recount the deaths of Giulumjan Janday and Faramaz Farasat, the former tutors of the deceased underling Elbey's grandchildren, and the state security organ's unexplained release of his former driver and groundskeeper, Mamed-aga and Firdovsy.

In a word, the book ends with a chaotic, discordant “automobile bacchanalia,” a “fantastical traffic jam,” in Nizam Shamistan's expression, where the most mundane of urban annoyances is intensified into a danger at the limits of the imagination.⁵¹ The note of discord is important to hear because it signals how, unlike Nizam Shamistan—the inspired academic who does not recognize the suffering of others and whose title Aylisli cites ironically—the implied author does not predict a happy future based on the imposing spectacle of a minor catastrophe. Nor does he see public recognition in the form of literary prizes as the aim of his novel, something Aylisli would soon be accused of and which he seems to be poking fun at. His more pessimistic tone is to be heard in the key of his “novel-requiem,” with a message presumably more closely aligned with what the

⁵¹ There something here that approaches the condition Kant associates with the sublime of magnitude or power, and yet a traffic jam, and here one must agree with Burke's type of thought, cannot be sublime.

Master reads aloud (much as Charlie Chaplin makes his Great Dictator read a speech that contradicts his image) from his terrified chef's secret diary:

*This is the epoch of fictitious development, for which the time will come to settle accounts not only in blood and the loss of material assets but in long years of decline, disbelief in everything, universal devastation, general fear of any kind of ideology, indifference to politics, and an attraction to philistine prosperity, and nihilism. (Aylisli, Farewell 261)*⁵²

As Wachtel remarks, “it would be difficult to find a better characterization of our world in the era of Trump, Putin, Erdogan than this” (Aylisli, *Farewell* 308). Wachtel's characterization implicitly argues for Aylisli's *Fantastical Traffic Jam* not only as a work of “world literature”—as a text that represents its culture or as a work that has left a national literature via translation—but as a “global novel,” in Adam Kirsch's definition of the term: a novel “faithful to the way that the global is actually lived—not as the abolition of place, but as a theme by which place is mediated” (Kirsch 12). Thus a story situated in the author's fictitious “Allahabad,” which is portrayed almost as another planet under another sun, becomes saturated with a global era of fictitious development, disinformation, decline, devastation, philistine prosperity, and nihilism. Indeed, to return to the theme with which this discussion began, the “global” itself, as it “mediates” experience instead of standing as a known object of experience, seems inseparable today from a consciousness of catastrophes of all kinds, for which a “fantastical traffic jam” in Allahabad on the hottest day of the year might serve as a working image.⁵³ Kirsch writes in a way that resonates with the implied author of a *Fantastical Traffic Jam* when he

⁵² Note: the “era” names the world (a human age).

⁵³ Kirsch seems to think the same. See Kirsch 2016, 24: “how do contemporary global problems, including immigration, terrorism, environmental degradation, and sexual exploitation, appear through the lens of fiction”

argues for the importance of the “global novel,” in particular because he includes a note of pessimism in his overall hopeful message.

Ambitious novelists in the twenty-first century will find themselves writing global novels, not out of a cynical desire to elevate their commercial or critical rewards, but because individual lives are now conceived under the sign of the whole globe. In the process, such writers will indeed encounter the problems of representation and homogenization that criticism has been quick to point out. But such problems are not necessarily disabling: for the resourceful novelist, they can be stimulating and productive. To examine the global novel in its twenty-first century variety is to be hopeful, if not for humanity, then at least for the capacity of fiction to reveal humanity to itself. (Kirsch 25-6)

The purpose of this chapter is not to rail against universal catastrophe, however. It is rather to analyze how Akram Aylisli confronts different forms of catastrophe through literature in a *Fantastical Traffic Jam* to reveal, to the extent to which this is possible, humanity to itself.

As regards the novel as a whole, *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* is dedicated to the author’s seventieth-fifth birthday, which, he writes, “has not coincided with the best of times for my fate as a writer,” and takes its epigraph from Gor’kii’s *Untimely Thoughts*: “No matter in whose hands power lies, my human right to look at it with a critical eye remains” (Aylisli 2018, 260). As the author explains on a leaf separating the title page from the novella:

This work is not about SOMEONE but about SOMETHING. To be precise, about glutinous regimes that devour themselves. In a theoretical country that we’ll call Allahabad, the highest authority of that kind of regime is embodied by fictitious personages who do not have prototypes in real life. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 160)

The novella proper opens with the nightmarish experience of its protagonist, the misfortunate, highly-placed underling Elbey, as he finds himself locked out of his office on the seventh floor of the six-story “Operations Headquarters for the Restoration of Fountains and Waterfalls in the Name of Progress and Pluralism.” The novel will tell the

story of Elbey's life and death in relation to his Master, who has, unbeknownst to Elbey, taken away his fortune and had him locked out of his own office as a sign that his career, indeed, his very life, is over. For the man has bargained away his soul.⁵⁴ Wachtel summarizes the basic plot.

Elbey is a nonentity who has spent his entire career as a toady to the leader of the fictional land of Allahabad, which bears an uncanny similarity to Aylisli's Azerbaijan. He has spent his career sucking up to the great leader, amassing enormous wealth in the process. The story resolves around the loss of his position and eventually of his life at the whim of the leader whose will he has served. (Wachtel, "A Writer for his Time" 304)

The novella is narrated, according to the author, in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's ironic "magical realist" style. In a way reminiscent of *Yemen*, it constantly draws attention to its own narrative devices.⁵⁵ The comparatively harmless chapter describing the birth of the dictator, which the informed reader understands by certain signs would date in our real world to 1945-8,⁵⁶ provides a good example of this.

The Master's father had been known by the simple name of Piri, which was extremely common in his hometown. But the local people (were they one people?) having a special passion for salty language, had awarded him the heretofore unprecedented nickname of "Piri Preputsy." (Aylisli, *Farewell* 188)

⁵⁴ He has bargained away his grandmother's golden fruits for gold.

⁵⁵ Bell recites the typical account of 'magical realism,' treating the "the marvelous and the real" as identical, in the Latin American context. "Magical realism draws on pre-scientific folk belief to subvert the 'Western' commitment to scientific reason, itself associated with both imperialism and a history of realistic representation so that the genre is intrinsically oppositional and progressive" (179). Discussing the situation of the writer in the 20th century, he goes on to say: "Imaginative writers such as Carpentier and Garcia Marquez, who have strong political and historical views, are for that very reason impelled to create a literary density within their fiction which is why it may be an important underlying impulse of 'magical realism' more generally to foreground and affirm the literary as such. To take the sub-genre in this way is to deflect its meaning from pre-modern ethnographic exceptionalism and to see it rather as the expression of a highly sophisticated universality." Garcia Marquez's own remarkable novels written after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, including *The Autumn of the Patriarch* [...] are not magical but they are highly, and consciously, literary. That also explains why 'magical realism' has characterized widely different writers around the world, irrespective of influence from a single regional center [such as Bulgakov] (186).

⁵⁶ The announcement of Ordubadi's *Sword and Quill* dates the chapter.

The narrative goes on to explain that Piri Preputsy, being the local barber, also acts as the dentist and surgeon. Hence his nick-name, which derives from the foreskin of male genitalia, which Piri removes during the religious ceremony of circumcision. The novel goes on to indulge in how Piri's profession finds its reflection in the language of folklore:

His pliers—from Tsar Nikolai's time long ago.
His razor—a gift from old Noah.
He never said morning prayers before vodka.
Such was the Piri Preputsy we knew
And his wife Baji khanum Gold Tooth.

And this:

One p... cost fifteen pounds of wheat;
From that wheat, his wife baked bread.
He had the conscience of a sack of p... 's,
Piri cut the p..., hung it on a twig.
He got what was owed and took off, Uncle Piri. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 188)

The attention to folklore recalls the poetics of “village prose.”⁵⁷ However, the interest of the narrative is not exhausted in showcasing the “salty language” of the folk, which in a sense carries the responsibility of becoming the “collective folk author” of the entire chapter, in distinction to the implied author of the novella. Rather, it is found in the parenthetical statement that asks the question about the folk itself: were they one people? The first parenthetical question arises as a slight against the ideology of nationalism that reigns in Azerbaijan by alluding to an earlier “local” memory and a possible ethnic plurality informing the “spirit of place,” a plurality, perhaps, conspicuous in its absence. This “parenthetical gesture” is repeated throughout the narrative, as questions arise, a

⁵⁷ Parthé discusses the importance of the “skaz” technique to Shukshin, whom in general she does not count as a *derevenshiki*, in her chapter on the Poetics of Village Prose (36).

running commentary is maintained, and the “collective folk creator” is parodied. For example:

After four girls, Allah sent him [Piri] a boy (in this manner, lightly tinged with socialist realism, our collective folk creator turns to the next page in the life story of Piri Preputsy, the happy father of a newborn son).” (Aylisli, *Farewell* 189)

Or, when the midwife Raziya wakes Piri with the news:

“Open up, you fornicator! Get up, you owe me!” (The observant teller of folk tales, being able to share someone else’s happiness and read someone else’s thoughts from any distance, continues the story in the triumphant intonations of the midwife’s lips). (Aylisli, *Farewell* 189)

With regard to “what was owed” (how passionately the wordsmith of folklore assures us of this!) Piri wasn’t at all stingy. Not even having seen his son, he rushed to the henhouse and caught a strong rooster and laying hen for Raziya. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 191)

Other examples occur when Piri goes to celebrate with his friend, Shroud Sadykhov, and the secretary (“an actual official, not a girl who types”) Siddiga, a fervent reader who expresses her anticipation of a new book called “Sword and Quill,” or in her garbled hearing “Gored and Thrilled.”

He very much wanted to share his joy with someone (thus our indefatigable, pseudo-socialist realist continues his happy, cockamamie story, not at all ashamed at pretending to be a direct witness to some entirely unfunny and uncomical historical events). (Aylisli, *Farewell* 191)

For ten years Piri Preputsy and Shroud Sadykhov together (continues the storyteller, clumsily flirting with historical events) fought shoulder-to-shoulder against kulaks and any kind of “alien elements” like *Sayyid Miribrahim*, who’d twice completed the *haj* before the 1920s. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 192)

The chapter culminates with Piri Preputsy’s having intercourse with Siddiga in a dream.

(Here our collective creator of honest fables went for broke) [...] The famous virtuoso of circumcision, barber, and toothpuller also slept sweetly in complete solitude on a soft couch in the unified village council of Kellekend and Guillekend, covered with the thick hide of a three-year-old pedigreed goat. But the base devil—who always finds ways to work his nasty deeds—taking the form of Siddiga this time, climbed into the dreams of our extremely well-fortified and

sated Piri Preputsy and, systematically adding a little sweetness to his already-sweet dreams, concocted filth upon filth, following one single goal—to most cleverly and keenly corrupt the true son of the Glorious Party and father of a newborn child so as to disgrace his honest name in the eyes of all working people. [...]

“Never! For shame! Get away, girl! Go away, girl, stop! Keep away from me, keep away!”

But when Piri shouted “Keep away from me!”—and, really, this could only occur in a dream—another unexpected thing happened, something even the devil himself couldn’t have thought up. The golden-red rooster Piri had given the midwife Raziya took off like an eagle into the heavens, spread his wings and like a real eagle flew directly to the five-pointed Kremlin star! Knowing very well the outstanding ability of his former rooster to shit anywhere and everywhere he could (he’d given that particular rooster to Raziya for just that reason), the master was terribly worried. And when the rooster settled directly on the sharp points of the star, Preputsy’s alarm changed to panic: “Shoo, shoo, be off, get off of that! Siddiga! Raziya! Ooh, ooh! Shoo, shoo, shoo!” (Aylisli, *Farewell* 196-7)

As these short selections demonstrate, the parenthetical statements in this chapter function to “bare the device” or “estrangle” the narrative, which is identified both with a “collective folk author” as well as with a kind of “pseudo-socialist realism.” This becomes most clear when the narrative “flirts” with the historical events of the Stalinist purges, which contain realities and perspectives that socialist realism erased. Alerted by the implied author’s parentheses, the reader understands that this cozy, folksy group of friends has a history, in which they worked to have their neighbors imprisoned or killed, a fate some of them, ironically will share.⁵⁸ The dream further injects a dose of “magical realism” into pseudo-soviet realism of the chapter as the author “turns the world on his head with his eyes closed” in a single fantastic image.⁵⁹ The dense dream-image⁶⁰ marks

⁵⁸ “[Shoud] Sadykhov, accused of political sluggishness in the battle with ‘foreign elements’ [...] was sent to Siberia—evidently in order to meet up with the miller Suleiman and in the calm conditions of that place discuss funeral-related and other important issues with him” (Aylisli, *Farewell* 199).

⁵⁹ See Aylisli 2018, 274: “A writer is always in the service of God, even when God seems unfair to him in the highest degree. A writer is free in all his actions and activities, which are controlled only by his conscience. He’s capable of standing the world on its head even with his eyes closed, as I was just able to do in this enchanted dream.” The dream Aylisli refers to here is recounted in “Farewell, Aylis.”

an unresolved anxiety in the narrative of reality, since it alludes to shameful destruction—like the farce that follows tragedy—violence, absurdity, and uncertainty.

The following chapter, ironically entitled “prosaically realistic,” is the only fragment of the novel published in Azerbaijani, precisely because it is also the most harmless chapter of the book. It takes place approximately twenty-five years after the dictator’s birth. Recounting the story of the future dictator’s visit to the village library as “a representative of authority,” it claims to return to a realistic style more “acceptable to the modern reader” (Aylisli, *Farewell* 199).⁶¹ Elements of “magical realism” persist in the narrative, nevertheless, such as the vision of Piri’s intoxicated ghost sitting and weeping atop of his grave, asking a passer-by to have the crimson rooster he gave to Raziya butchered and cooked (Aylisli, *Farewell* 199). The representative of authority—hereafter *Rais* (Azerbaijani for “boss”)—has come to the library to reprimand the librarian and her friend for plagiarizing novels to compose love letters on behalf of the young people of the village; this would normally be no problem, except that for some reason the women have also written a love letter to Lenin’s mausoleum. After *Rais* obtains signed promises from the two friends not to engage in such antics in the future, the narrative turns to a discussion of a new novel, announced in the previous chapter: *Sword and Quill*. This novel, which is to become the dictator’s favorite, and at a certain point in history was the most popular novel in Azerbaijan, is universally praised by the

⁶⁰ Although the context in which Aylisli writes may not be identical with the rhetoric of sleeping/waking that surrounded the beginnings of literary Modernism in China, Chan’s analysis of the role of dreams in this context seems partially applicable. I am particularly intrigued by the idea that “dream rhetoric may indexically point to a historic crisis” (18). For Aylis, this crisis might be defined by the end of the Soviet Union and the subsequent narrative of “progress and pluralism,” as he calls it in *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* (see below).

⁶¹ This is clearly an ironic statement about what is “acceptable.”

characters as meaningful and profound, though in the author's footnote it is revealed to be false and superficial (Aylisli, *Farewell* 325).

Indeed, the book is a lengthy, monotonous, unimaginative work, an historical novel that flies in the face of all historical truth. It represents the lonely Persian-language poet Nizami Ganjavi as a proto-nationalist Azerbaijani demagogue, the “quill of wisdom” who should direct his friend Fahraddin, “the sword of power.” Written by Mamed Said Ordubadi, whose last name recalls Aylisli's birthplace as well, the book's plot progresses by way of the unrelieved intrigue of forged letters. In this chapter, the village's only copy of the book happens to be in the hands of Siddiga, the official of Piri Preputsy's dream. This is significant because the future dictator will eventually enter a perverse union of “the sword with the pen” with the former Secretary when his authority in the village rivaled by a *sayyid* (Aylisli, *Farewell* 242).

Now the married head of the ZAGSONOT, Sadigga directs her publisher husband to pen an article on behalf of the *Rais* saying that he descends from “princes” rather than from a barber, from Miri, rather than Piri.⁶² This destruction of true biography parallels the *Rais*' ignorant destruction of the village's historical willow groves for an event in celebration of Lenin (he wants to replant the trees along a road, though there is not enough water to keep them alive there during the summer) as well as his decision to dig up the village graveyard to transport its dead to a new cemetery in honor of the heroes of the home front during the war, such as his father, who was “a hero” of dekulakization. These activities are destructive on many levels. All are done to glorify the *Rais*, who, in the chronicle of Aylisli, will preside over the destruction of his land (i.e. a place of the

⁶² The master's rise to power relies on a form of general amnesia, since he rose from a commoner who supported dekulakization; he himself informed on people and was thus granted authority; he later pretends to have come from a family persecuted by the Soviets.

past, history, memory, and biography) until the present “fantastical traffic jam.” The future dictator embodies a series of minor catastrophes that culminate in the “era of false development” described by Tray, making him comparable to the dream’s crimson-rooster- conjurer.

To return to “prosaically realistic,” despite its relatively inoffensive contents, this chapter is also important from a literary point of view. Just as in *Yemen* and *Stone Dreams*, where Aylisli sets his own form of literature in opposition to Anar and Buniatov, in *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* he parodies the empty popularity of Ordubadi’s *Sword and Quill*, the harmony of literature and political power, and the superficial nationalism of its “Aesopian language.”⁶³ By contrast, Aylisli artistic method is closer to Tolstoy’s “I cannot be silent,” bringing to the surface the thoughts of those like Tray, the lowliest, most insignificant slaves of the master,⁶⁴ and making them pass, not only before the dictator’s eyes, but also imaginatively through his lips and voice.

Furthermore, “prosaically realistic” is important because it is the only part of *A Fantastical Traffic Jam* for which an Azerbaijani version is available. It thus represents the only point of comparison between the many versions of Aylisli’s text, and thus it is essential to the analysis of the book as it relates to discourse surrounding World

⁶³ Analyzing the history of modern Azerbaijani literature in terms of “Aesopian language,” i.e. a literature of two dimensions—the outer/manifest, and the inner/hidden—Tyrell reads Ordubadi’s work, largely concurring with Aylisli: it is a work of quantity rather than quality (42). Nevertheless, she says that the author’s willingness to tamper with history did set an important precedent for subsequent works. Her overall assessment goes as follows: “The result is a nine-hundred page literary stew, containing every ingredient associated with the paradoxes of Soviet rule, including suppression of freedom of speech, women’s liberation, secularism, cultural superiority versus state policy, to name but a few. His characters express opposing views either in the usual dialogue form, or in the form of a long oratorio. For example, he puts the prominent twelfth-century poet, Nizami Ganjavi, on a pedestal to proclaim a heated Soviet-style nationalist speech penned by the author, but sets the scene at a public gathering on the twelfth-century streets of Azerbaijan. Ironically, Nizami was a hermit who seldom appeared in public. Such literary license leave the impression that this author carried the art of adaptation too far” (42).

⁶⁴ This does recall Hegel’s dialectic.

Literature and the Global Novel. Published as a fragment on *Azadliq Radio*'s website in 2010, the Azerbaijani version seems to represent a draft; at the very least, some of the characters' names would eventually be changed. It nevertheless represents the author's own work. Analysis of the Azerbaijani shows that, in addition to the political catastrophe that necessitated the book's translation, the catastrophe of Babel is also something Aylisli has had to contend with.

Güllükəndə (kəndin öz dililə desək) “vur-çatdasın” yaz gəlmişdi. Ancaq bu yaz Pülük Pirinin yuxuda xoruzla əlləşdiyi o qarlı yanvarın yazı deyildi, ondan çox-çox sonranın gözəl bahar fəsillərindən biriydi. (Aylisli, *Möhtəşəm*)⁶⁵

Spring had arrived in Giulliukend. However, it wasn't the same spring that followed that January night when Piri struggled desperately with the impudent rooster in his sleep, but a completely different one many, many years later. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 198)

The opening passage alludes to a local Azerbaijani expression (vur-çatdasın-“hit-let-it-break) that is dropped from the Russian, presumably because it makes no sense to translate an expression whose entire meaning resides in a specifically local idiom's contrast with standard speech; hence, it is also dropped from the English. The linguistic registers in the Azerbaijani can also not be captured in translation, since, while Azerbaijani has made room for Russian expressions because of its history, the reverse is less often the case. As a result, this play is also lost in English translation. This is seen in a sentence where a transcribed Russian phrase appears, which does not appear in either the Russian or the English versions.

Və hələ bununla da kifayətlənməyib, onun – hər kəsin öz əyin paltarında qəbrə qoyulması barədəki – məlum qərarına “volyuntarist qərar” və “utopik xəyal” adı qoyub, Sadıqovun “liçni delo”suna (özü Sibirdə ikən!) bir yağlı partiya töhməti də yazıb-yapışdırmışdılar. (Aylisli, *Möhtəşəm*)

⁶⁵ For the Azerbaijani version, see *Azadliq radiosu*: <https://www.azadliq.org/a/2029281.html>

This dynamic recalls Apter's argument in favor of the "un-translatable" against the idea of a universal World Literature. Certainly, one needs to respect aspects of texts that resist the sort of commodification and indifference that "World Literature" as an institution in the West has come to rely upon; this part of Apter's argument is incontestable. There are indeed registers in Aylisli's Azerbaijani text that are not accessible in Russian or English. At the same time, given Aylisli's background as a Soviet/Azerbaijani writer, it is not certain that one should consider his Russian texts as altogether secondary to the Azerbaijani. It is possible to consider them as creative, deterritorialized versions of the text. The epigraph of *Yemen*, cited above, is one case in point. Another example can be found in the opening scenes of *Stone Dreams*, where Karabaghli speaks in a distinctive Azerbaijani-Russian to the doctor from Moscow.⁶⁶ Thus, the deterritorialization of Russian becomes a feature of Aylisli's Russian text even as it seeks refuge in the Russian language; as a Soviet/Azerbaijani writer, it is the fate of Aylisli's books to share these two linguistic worlds. This is something that English cannot imitate, of course. Yet this displacement into the "Babel" of world literature in English is not something that the author has merely suffered. One must recall that it was for the English translation that Aylisli wrote his afterword, "Farewell, Aylis," thus confronting this deterritorialization as a conscious artist.

⁶⁶ For example, the opening scene of the novel-requiem: "—Доктор, родной мой, доктор...убили. Такого человека, середь беда дня, избили, уничтожили. Это все еразы. Пять-шесть парней-еразов... Эти сукины дети беженцы совсем не уважают людей, доктор, дорогой мой. Ни артистов они не признают, ни поэтов, ни писателей. Только назови кого-то армянином—и все. Тут же швырнут под ноги и затопчут, как дикие звери. Раздерут на части, и никто близко подойти не смеет... Я им говорю: не бейте, этот человек, говорю, не армянин, он наш человек, сын нашего народа, гордость и совесть нации. Да кто там слушает. Даже не дали мне свое имя назвать. Так врезали ногой в бок, что я чуть там не умер. Вот сюда, доктор, в правый бок. До сих пор ноет."

In the afterword, Aylisli narrates his experience of going into “internal exile” as he watched the “Stone Dreams Scandal” unfold on Azerbaijani television; in doing so, he describes his realization that the cherished world of his memory, which he had recreated in fiction, had been unrecognizably falsified by contemporary “reality.”

February 9, 2013, turned out to be the most terrible day of my life, as well as an unexpected turning point in my fate: on that day, in my native village, they burned my books!!! [...] It is a torture for a writer when a people turns into a mob literally before his eyes. And having blended into the mob, a person immediately becomes not just faceless and soulless but horribly corrupt. [...] How could those people so quickly forget the massive destruction of churches and cemeteries that had begun in Nakhchivan all of ten to fifteen years previously? And is it really possible that people born into and living in the Ordubad district hadn't heard at least once about the Armenian pogrom that took place at one time in Aylis? Consequently, they'd come there to “execute” me for the fact that in my novel I proclaimed a certain truth that was well known to them all. “Akram is an Armenian! Akram is a traitor to his motherland! Death to Akram!”—on that day they were courageous in their curses addressed to me, as if the demon of aggression had awakened in them. [...] Aylis was no longer mine. And would never be mine again. Lord, why was I rejoicing then?! [...] Perhaps I experienced such relief because the Aylis taken away from me that day by the potent hand of the authorities hadn't been my Aylis for a long time already. It was their Aylis: without God, without Memory, without History, and without a Biography. [...] Let some in my motherland think I'm not a writer: so be it. I don't need honor or glory in a country where they burn books and a killer with an ax is elevated to the rank of hero. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 286-91)

In an interview with the writer Shura Burtin from 2014, Aylisli said something that helps clarify the sense of his *Farewell*: “We're fighting with Armenians for territory, but no one actually needs the land itself. It turns out that's not what we're fighting for” (4). At first, it seems unclear what Aylisli has in mind when he says, contrary to all common sense, that “no one needs the land itself,” and that the Azerbaijanis and Armenians are not actually fighting over that. Aylisli wants to say, however, that the war has destroyed the land; hence, no one actually cares for it. They may be fighting over something—Territory, Power, Identity etc.—but the “land ethic” à la Aldo Leopold is altogether

lacking. Incidentally, this distinction—between *malen'kaia rodina* (little homeland) and territory—is something that Parthé makes in her discussion of the poetics of “village prose,” and thus might serve to show the extent that Aylisli continues to work in that tradition.

Village Prose turns away from gigantism—the large, impersonal, multinational state whose citizens move easily from one territory to another, or, as officials, from kolkhoz to kolkhoz. Rural writers and critics have spoken about the crucial difference between homeland and territory: ‘a person living on a territory has no sense of home, of a small or large native land’ (9).

The values that give life to the land, those which make it “home,” or a place of dwelling, are shown to have been demolished in life by Aylisli, though they may “live,” “rescued” in some way in Aylisli’s work, who through this experience comes to an epiphany regarding his fate.

I can’t remember how I slept that night or what I dreamed. But waking up the next morning, I felt such calmness and ease in myself that those feelings will always stay in my soul and memory. That was a condition of spirit greater than happiness itself. And I understood that something had taken place in my life that was more important than anything in all the preceding time of my existence under God’s heaven.

For the first time in my life I understood clearly that my fate as a writer stands behind me. It’s mine, only mine, and no power of any kind over it has been given to anyone besides me.

For the first time in my life I was convinced that if a person retains the ability to be greater than his own suffering, it’s impossible to deny him all joy. And thanks to that same Aylis that ling ago gave me my first bitter lessons in life, I’ve turned out to be quiet patient and hardy. (Aylisli, *Farewell* 290)

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Without wishing to defend them as institutions, the analysis of the novels above should make clear that many of the objections brought against the dangers of World Literature and the Global Novel do not fit the works of Aylisli. If Aylisli has been accused of courting favor with foreign audiences at the expense of complex local experience, for example, it has only been by interested, extremely unreliable opponents inside Azerbaijan, many of whom did not bother to read his books. In this context, it is worthwhile dwelling on how global statements leveled against World Literature or the Global Novel themselves ignore the different forms these may take in different parts of the world, at different times, in the creative imaginations of different people. How will Aylisli's books be read outside Azerbaijani? In different ways, surely. And in Azerbaijan, in the future? I would not venture to say. This thesis has been an attempt to explore the meaning of world literature in Aylisli's non-traditional novel. In *Yemen*, I find the "global" is an active perspective at work in the novel itself, even as Aylisli responds to the literary creation of a locale and local history in a writer like Faulkner; in *Stone Dreams*, I find an attempt at "minor literature," which disrupts the logic of identity according to which the institution of World Literature often functions; and in *A Fantastical Traffic Jam*, I find the attempt to confront our era's catastrophe in language. Those who read these books with any attention today, will surely find texts that stem from profound a spiritual bravery and artistic integrity.

APPENDIX

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