

“Our revenge will be to survive”: Two Irish Narrations of the Armenian Genocide

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Abstract:

The 1915-1922 Armenian Genocide has been the subject of memoirs and historical accounts, most of them written by diasporic Armenians, but, unlike the Shoah, has not inspired much creative literature. It is therefore the more surprising that the latest fictional accounts should come from Ireland. *Anyush* (2014), the novel of Limerick-born Martine Madden, and a film called *The Promise* (2015) by the Irish director Terry George, both tell moving and impossible love stories which are a thin pretext for eliciting empathy for the sufferings of the Armenians and fighting the lack of recognition of the genocide. While giving a graphic description of the abuses at the hands of Turkish soldiers and of the nightmarish journey of the deportees starved to death, decimated by epidemics and herded through mountains and deserts with no precise destination except death, the two authors evoke memories of similar past and present actions in the world intended to annihilate an ethnic group with its language and culture. Writing about one group resonates against the histories of the others, in a sort of *mise en abyme* of blind human violence and ethnic hatred. The interest of Madden and George in the historical facts concerning this large Christian minority of the Ottoman Empire, much as it was inspired by compassion and a desire to denounce this still unrecognized massacre, may be due to a special sensitivity to the suppression of identity linked to a nationalist reading of the history of Ireland and more particularly of the Great Famine.

Keywords: Martine Madden, Resilience, Terry George, The Armenian Genocide, The Great Famine

1. Introduction

The Armenian Genocide, which took place in the middle of the World War I resulting in the loss of one-and-a-half million lives, has been the object

of witness literature, memoirs and historical accounts but, unlike the Shoah, has not inspired much creative literature or filming.

It is therefore surprising that the anniversary of the dramatic events of 1915-1922 in the Ottoman Empire should have been marked in Ireland of all places, through two remarkable productions: a novel, *Anyush* (2014), by a debutante writer from Limerick, Martine Madden, and a film, *The Promise* (2016) by a well-known director, Terry George. While *Anyush* was Madden's first novel, George was a director whose fame had been well established by *Hotel Rwanda* and several films about the Troubles (*The Boxer*, *In the Name of the Father*, *Some Mother's Son*). Because of his sensitivity to troubled nations and his interest in bringing history to life by making it the background of engaging love stories, he was enrolled by a millionaire producer of Armenian origins, Kirk Kerkorian, to mark the hundredth anniversary of the massacre and fight the indifference, indeed the negationism, regarding Armenia's past.

That two Irish people should have chosen to write about the tragic happenings that took place in the Ottoman Empire, right when Ireland was commemorating its own, often painful, events which eventually led to independence, suggests that their interest in the historical facts concerning the Armenian population, much as it was inspired by compassion and a desire to denounce this still unrecognized massacre, may be due to a special awareness of the suppression of identity such as had also been at work, although less violently, within the context of the British Empire.

Armenians, in ways reminding of the plight of the Irish, the Jews, native Americans or more recently, Bosnians, Christian Syrians, the Rohingya in Myanmar or the hordes of refugees landing on Mediterranean coasts after terrifying travels, fit into a category of people whose national, cultural or religious identity is or was denied or threatened with obliteration and whose historical experience is marked by injustice and persecutions. Writing about one group resonates against the histories of the others, in a sort of *mise en abyme* of blind human violence and ethnic hatred. The tale of one beleaguered people duplicates that of another and condenses the ultimate meaning of all the similar stories that resemble it. Once a culture starts categorizing members of its community as "us" and "them" and denies the humanity of the Other, that country is on the way that leads to genocide. This is what happened in the Ottoman Empire but also in Ireland before its independence.

Novels such as *Anyush* or the film *The Promise* have the purpose of obtaining the belated result of calling attention on the Armenian Genocide in the context of other similar atrocities (as the Armenian producer hoped). The impossible love story of a Turkish captain, Jahan Orfalea, with an Armenian girl, Anyush, in Madden's eponymous novel, becomes a pretext for describing the life and sufferings of this large Christian minority of the Ottoman Empire. In the background are the unspeakable horrors of those years, the brutality of the Turks displayed through harassment, killings and mass-deportation but also

the resilience of the heroine and her people who maintain their self-respect, generosity and dreams in the face of racial and confessional violence. The reunion of Anyush with her daughter Lale, the fruit of her relationship with the Turkish captain, and their survival and emigration to America to join the Armenian diaspora are the symbol of the resilience of their race.

Similarly, *The Promise*, also revolving around a love story, the triangle between a woman of Armenian origins, Ana, and two men, the American reporter, Chris, and the Armenian medical student, Mikael, ends after many shocking examples of cruelty, with the wedding, in the safety of America, of Yeva, Mikael's niece, one of the few survivors of the family group whose tragedy we follow in the film. Her uncle, also a survivor, toasting the bride in the final scene of the film, remembers her deceased parents "and all those families lost in an attempt to wipe our nation from the face of the earth" and affirms that they are still with them, restating Armenian resilience: "We're here. We're still here". As Ana had earlier said when Mikael was expressing his desire for revenge, "Our revenge will be to survive", a phrase that echoes Bobby Sand's "Our revenge will be our children's laughter". This voluntary or involuntary echo is a hint that George finds some analogies between the resistance of the two people, the Armenians and the Irish, in the face of repeated attempts to wipe them out.

As does Madden.

In the course of a FaceTime interview, Madden recognizes that although when she started writing her novel she was not aware of any resemblance between the two situations, while researching the Irish Famine for a story intended for young adults she "did realise that we'd had a genocide of our own. And in many ways it was just as horrible" (Madden, October 3, 2017, see below).

2. *The Historical Background*

In the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, numerous Armenian communities – Christians of the Gregorian orthodox denomination with a language and a culture of their own – existed in the middle of a Moslem majority, in the North-East of Turkey, as in the fictional Mushar, a village on the coast of the Black Sea, near Trebizond, described in *Anyush* or the one at the south-eastern border, Sirun, where the protagonist of Terry George's film lived.

In spite of the alleged regime of tolerance of the Ottoman Empire towards racial and confessional diversity and the respect the Armenian community had enjoyed at the court of the Sultan, the Armenians who, like the Greeks or the Jews, lived in their homogeneous communities in Constantinople or in Anatolia, maintaining their language, religious rituals and traditions, had actually experienced much harassment throughout history. The image of tolerance of the Empire put up for foreigners was belied by historical reality: repeated persecutions and little-known *pogroms* had taken place several times before the

1915 events, leaving much hostility and suspiciousness between the two people. In the novel, we are reminded of this by the hideaway and love-nest of Anyush and Jahan, the ruins of a church that had been destroyed and burnt down by the Turks in grandma Gohar's youth. It becomes a symbol of the long enmity, which the Romeo-and-Juliet-like love-story cannot heal.

Madden takes a two-pronged approach to the telling of history: on the one hand, we see history in action as the protagonists of the novel love, suffer and die; on the other, history is told by a number of witnesses. Information about a tormented pre-Genocide past comes first of all from the tales of the old people. Gohar, Anyush's grandmother, illustrates the long history of oppression and prevarication with memories from her youth as when "the Turks issued an order declaring that Armenian taxes were to be doubled. Twice what the Turkish farmers were expected to pay and twice what [her] family could afford" (Madden 2014, 121). As a consequence, their house and land were confiscated and sold for a fraction of its value to a rich and devious Armenian, Kazbek, as an award for his collaboration with the Turks and his activity as an informer. Anyush and her mother now have to do his laundry to pay him rent for what was once theirs. It is not surprising, then that Gohar, on discovering her granddaughter's relationship with a Turkish soldier, should warn her:

No Turk is a friend to Armenians. Why do you think Armenians cannot buy land, only work it for some Turkish landlord until we're too old or too broken to be of any use any more? Oh our men are good enough as war fodder, or for the labour gangs, but for nothing else! We're mules to them, Anyush. Less valuable than the dogs on the street. [...] There hasn't been a single generation of Armenians who weren't burned or tortured or had their women raped by the Turks. (Madden 2014, 120)

The positive Turkish protagonist of the novel Captain Orfalea, also furnishes some information to the reader by complaining about a "nationalistic fervour spreading throughout the country like fire so that 'Armenian' [...] had become a dirty word" (Madden 2014, 99). The movement of Young Turks initially progressive and reformist, had, in fact, turned chauvinistic with the emergence of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) contrary to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society that had prevailed in the Ottoman empire and was promoting Pan-Turkism instead with a view to control the large Turkic communities within Russia. The Armenians that resided mostly in areas of strategic value for the CUP's expansionist goals were accused of being sympathetic to Russia. Thus at the beginnings of World War I, under the cover of political and military necessities, the latent hostility of the past was turned into a systematic government project of ethnical cleansing of which the Armenians were the target. As Dr Trowbridge, a long-time resident of the area, puts it: "The war is just what the Turks have been waiting for – the perfect opportunity to wipe out an entire race" (Madden 2014, 148).

Jahan understood that scapegoats were needed to divert attention from the poor results of the war but he could not suspect the form nor the extent the reprisal would take although he had noticed that the Armenian soldiers who had been conscripted at the beginning of the war and served in his battalion earning his respect were no longer heard about, causing his concern. In the best of hypotheses “they had been demobilized and assigned to unarmed battalions” or, as he had heard say, “they had been shot because of their allegiance to the Russians, or set free and used as target practice” (Madden 2014, 26). In the film, *The Promise*, this is precisely the situation in which Mikael finds himself after he has been sent to a work-camp as an Armenian soldier not bearing weapons. The systematic slaughter of the Armenians had started before the fateful spring of 1915 with the murder of the able-bodied males already drafted into the Ottoman armed forces. At the start of *Anyush* the village was only inhabited by women, children and old people.

Later in the novel, when the naïve and well-meaning Captain Orfalea had left the village where he was on duty and had been separated from his beloved, he was fed new information (passed on to the reader) through which he began to understand what was at stake:

A rumour was circulating around the German barracks that Armenians were being deported to Syria. Whole villages, Armin claimed, were being emptied of their Armenian population and moved to the desert near Deir al-Zor. Jahan listened with growing unease. In Constantinople he had seen for himself the empty Armenian premises, windows broken and shopfronts defaced. Newspapers rife with nationalistic fervour and anti-Armenian propaganda, and at every street corner talk of how the Nationalists were going to restore Turkey to its glory days with no place for Armenians or Greeks. (Madden 2014, 229)

However, the principal device adopted by Madden in order to provide some historical background to a situation that is mostly ignored (the author herself admits that in spite of honeymooning in Turkey “I had known next to nothing” about “Turkey’s role in the Armenian Genocide” (Madden, Face Time Interview, October 3, 2017, see below) is that of interspersing the narrative of escalating violence affecting the main characters with entries from the journal of an American missionary doctor, Charles Stewart, who had emigrated with his wife at the turn of the century to study trachoma which was endemic in the area. In her carefully researched novel, Madden bases these entries on historical testimonials by foreign eyewitnesses (missionaries, diplomats, journalists).

The debates between a naïve Stewart and a realistic fellow-doctor, an English man called Paul Trowbridge who knows the situation well, illustrate the two faces of the Empire’s attitude towards the Armenians. At the beginning of the story, Dr Charles Stewart appears as a sympathizer of Turkey affirming that he has “seen no evidence of [...] discrimination and find[s] the Turks a fair-minded, tolerant sort of people” (Madden 2014, 46).

When Paul warns him about signs of impending disaster, Stewart comments, “I wasn’t about to get embroiled in one of his theories about a Turkish conspiracy” (Madden 2014, 126) because Paul “has a particular bias toward Armenians [...] and believes, [...] that they are subject to all sorts of harsh rules and regulations at the hands of the Turks” (46). As the doctor and his wife become enmeshed in the life of the village taking care of the primary needs of the population through the creation of a health clinic and hospital, schools and workshops and, later on, as the situation deteriorates, of soup kitchens, his naïve view of the situation will be given the lie.

Although at times clumsy and tedious, these diaries are an important part of the novel, filling in on the historical background and providing summaries of events not directly represented. But, more importantly, they record the doctor’s change of heart under the pressure of evidence:

The Turks are the ruling class, the oppressors, if you like, even though historically the Armenians were here first. And the Kurds are fierce hill tribes who think nothing of killing his man for a horse or his money. They command respect even from the Turks. That leaves the Armenians, who are viewed by the government as being sympathetic to Russia, the old enemy, and so have little chance to improve their station in life. (Madden 2014, 39)

As the story advances, and his role changes from that of an observer to that of an active participant and sufferer in the story (one of his own daughter succumbs to the cholera caught from the Armenian children the family was taking care of), he will become himself a protagonist, fearing the violence of the Turks as the rest of the population he is trying to help and protect. *Anyush* is also Dr Stewart’s story. His slow awakening to the horror reflects what happened in the Western world with its slow recognition of the genocide and its acceptance of Turkey’s negationism. Stewart, in the epilogue of the novel, sounds prophetic of such forgetfulness:

How soon we forget. Hetty believes it was only to be expected, that people’s hearts and minds are drawn to other causes, other tragedies, and she’s probably right. In my lifetime, Armenians and their story will be forgotten. On this side of the world, at least, it will only be amongst those of us who lived through that terrible time that anything of it will be remembered. (Madden 2014, 369)

The novel also gains weight and credibility by staging some real historical figures. One of them is Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, a friend and protector of the Stewarts who, however, is mostly powerless when it comes to helping them and their cause (as he was in real life). Another important fictional presence is Armin Wegner, the German photographer who denounced the Armenian martyrdom through his writings and pictures. Armin strikes a friendship with the good Turkish Captain, Jahan Orfalea who is impressed and at times “made uncomfortable and occasionally ashamed” by the pictures the German has taken

even before the genocide and which are not “of Turkish palaces and landscapes, but of orphaned children, and street beggars, and buildings collapsing under the weight of those who lived in them” (Madden 2014, 228). Through conversations with him the naïve Orfalea is first made aware of what was actually happening.

Wegner also proposes to accompany Orfalea, to the displeasure of both Turkish and German authorities, when the latter, to his great dismay, is assigned to escort the Trebizond Armenians to the interior, “the lot of them. Every last one [...] Any man, woman and child of them. When you leave Trebizond, there will be no Armenian in it” (Madden 2014, 231). This fictional trip will give Wegner the opportunity for capturing his many images of the deportation while Orfalea will be instrumental in saving the tale-telling photographic plates of the German and consigning them in safe hands so that later on they will be used by Wegner to document and denounce the atrocities committed by the Turks and make a plea at the Peace Conference of 1919 for the creation of an independent Armenian state. Thanks to a coincidental meeting (there are many coincidences in the plot), Wegner, tells Anyush that her daughter is still alive and (supposedly) in the care of the Stewarts on their way back home to the United States and he also sends a letter to Jahan telling him that Anyush is in Lebanon pining to have news of her daughter. So Wegner is the *deus ex machina* behind the bitter-sweet ending of the novel when Jahan returns Lale to her mother in Beyrouth, where she is a refugee, just as she is about to emigrate to America.

Madden in her interview recognizes her debt to the German photographer. While digging in search of information about Armenians, she “came across Armin Wegner’s photographs of the genocide and those pictures were a revelation in the worst possible sense. [...] I had known nothing about the Armenian Genocide. My research started from there”) (Madden, 3 October 2017, see below).

Both Morgenthau and Wegner also appear briefly in *The Promise* where, however, the telling of the historical background is minimal, in the form of voice-over and through the reading of some of Chris, the journalist’s, reports for the Associated Press.

3. *The Two Plots*

The general development of *Anyush*, excluding the love-plot and individual stories, is well summarized in its various phases by the recurring dream Dr Stewart has after his return from Turkey:

I have a recurring dream where I’m in the village again. It is springtime and the lemon trees are in blossom. The square is crowded, full of people singing and dancing, much as it was on the day of Vardan Aykanian’s wedding. There is music playing, the oud and the doumbek. People are happy and everything is as it should be. I am standing among them smiling and clapping when I notice the music grow quiet. To my right, I see the band players, all the old men, put their instruments at their feet and disap-

pear into the lanes and side streets. They are followed by the women, and then the young girls in their summer aprons and scarves.

I am weeping now because I know they will come for the children next.

And even as the thought takes shape I see a child walk into a darkened alley.

All the children.

I call out but they cannot hear.

Try to hold them back but I cannot reach.

And there is silence.

Terrible silence.

I stand in the square alone, watching until the last child has gone. (Madden 2014, 371)

3.1 Pre-Genocide Period

The springtime idealized by Dr Stewart was not as idyllic as he remembered it in his dream, but the months preceding the official beginning of the genocide (April 24, 1915) were still a time when normal life could go on in Mushar, the fictional village on the Black Sea near Trebizond where the minority population of Armenians eked out a miserable existence almost under siege, surrounded by the hatred of the dominant Turkish and Moslem majority and in their turn fearing and despising the host country. Although most of the men had been conscripted and no news were heard from them, the few remaining ones worked for the Turks doing necessary construction (for instance Vardan Aykanian, Parzik's fiancé), the women tended their farms, did the washing for richer people (as Anyush and her mother); the children studied or learned trades at the school and workshops established by the Stewarts; chemists, doctors, nurses, priests exerted their tasks, admittedly in the middle of hardships. There were courtships (the wild Husik following Anyush everywhere "like a lamb"), love stories (the Romeo-and-Juliet-like love affair between the Armenian girl, Anyush, and a Turkish captain, Jahan Orfalea), marriages (Vardan and Perzik's with its tragic ending). All this took place despite the many warnings that things were not well.

The tone of violence of the novel is set by the very first scene which also introduces the main characters. "The air blew cold in the wake" (Madden 2014, 9) when Turkish soldiers came to the village, dominated at one end by a mosque and at the other by a Christian church. The first consequence is that a young boy, Kevork Talanian, who was trying to stop the looting of his impoverished farm, is savagely beaten by the soldiers under the eyes of his sisters, Sosi and Havat, a mentally handicapped girl, and their generous friend, Anyush (the heroine of the novel), who has brought some food to the starving family. Kevork is then dragged to a tree by a ferocious soldier nicknamed The Ferret (one of the villains of the story) and hanged "his face turning red and beginning to darken" and "his tongue pushing past his lips" (17).

Fortunately, thanks to the intervention of the Turkish hero of the story, the good Captain Jahan Orfalea, the boy is saved in the nick of time and the culprit punished. A current of attraction is established between Anyush and Jahan, yet,

despite the Captain's show of humanity, she exclaims in distrust: "He's a Turk [...] They are all the same" (23). But after several encounters in the village, at a wedding, and, especially along the coast and on secluded beaches where Anyush likes to walk and bathe, the two fall in love. What was at first like a game, becomes a passionate relationship, and their tender and sensuous meetings take place in a ruined Armenian church burnt down by the Turks in the days of her grandmother's youth. Nevertheless, the mementoes of the old enmity and the horrors that happen during their relationship do not affect them. "They were the limits of each other's existence, citizens of a country all their own. They were in love, and because it was forbidden and endlessly precious, they risked everything for it" (118).

Yet things had become increasingly rough. The marriage of Vardan Alkanian with Anyush's best friend Parzik, celebrated according to the old festive traditions in spite of the hardships endured by the village, ends up tragically. The father of the bridegroom, an old man, is set up to appear to have hidden weapons in the hay barn. Despite the Captain's and Dr Stewart's efforts, Alkanian is tried for treason and the episode ends with another hanging which this time cannot be stopped. The body of the old man will be left hanging for weeks in the village square as a reminder of the arbitrariness and hatred of the Turks.

This wedding, as we find out from Dr Stewart's diary, took place on the 21st of April 1915, just a few days before what Armenians call "Red Sunday", the 24th of April, considered the official starting date of the carefully planned genocide. On that day began the surprise rounding up of Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Istanbul willed by the nationalist Young Turk triumvirate of Enver, Talaat, and Jemal Pashas controlling the Ottoman Turkish regime. It was the start of the campaign by the Turkish government to eradicate Armenians from Turkey, foreshadowed by events such as the ones narrated in *Anyush*. As the narrator writes, "The hanging of old man Aykanian marked the start of everything that was to come. While the year wore on and events beyond the village were already casting a long shadow, Anyush thought only of Jahan" (Madden 2014, 115). And Jahan only of Anyush until, fearing to lose her and wanting to protect her from the dangers she faced, he proposed to marry her. Anyush was divided between delight and fear. She had felt a fool for dating Jahan and had feared how her mother would "disown her or throw her down the well" and her friends turn the cold shoulder on her. She realized that "if she married Jahan, she would lose the right to call herself Armenian" (157). And yet, "Nothing could spoil this day. [...] All through the wood she had whispered her name to the leaves, Anyush Orfalea. Bayan Anyush Orfalea, Bayan Anyush Charcoudian Orfalea. There was a rhythm to the names together, a perfect fit" (156-157).

But the outcome of a third horrible episode puts an end to the dream of the star-crossed lovers. The halfwit Havat had been found in an abandoned house in the woods, lying in her own blood, her hands tied behind her back, her tongue cut out, her hip dislocated. As it transpired from Captain Orfalea's

enquiry, she had been chain-raped by a group of soldiers of another regiment who took turns in assaulting her in the wake of their commanding officer, Nazim Ozhan, one of the rapists. An indignant captain Orfalea reports naively the crime to Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, believing in the fairness and sense of honour of the army. His letters, predictably, are left unanswered. Right on the day of his proposal, Ozhan's soldiers come for him, arrest and escort him to Trebizond where he is put on a ship sailing for Constantinople. Unable to say good-bye to his beloved, he hurriedly lets her have his parents' address in Constantinople so that they may at least correspond. But no letters will be exchanged between the two. When Jahan's father is told that his son intends to marry "an Armenian peasant" someone from "a breed not to become involved with" (Madden 2014, 180), he gives orders to intercept all the letters that are exchanged between the two with the consequence that Anyush will not be able to tell Jahan she is expecting a baby from him. The feelings of Anyush and Jahan for each other will be dried out by disappointment and resentment. They will meet again in the harrowing second and third phases of the novel but things will never be the same

Thus ends the first phase of Dr Stewart's dream, as "the music grows quiet" (371).

The pre-Genocide situation is presented in rosier tints in George's *The Promise*: Mikael's family had been for generations the chemists in the village of Sirun in the south-east of Asia, mixing drugs for Armenians and Turks alike. Mikael is a promising student, who has been able to enter the Imperial Medical Academy of Istanbul by getting an advance on the dowry of his affluent promised bride. In the elegant household of his uncle, a well-to-do merchant of the capital, he meets the sophisticated Ana, an Armenian woman raised in Paris, who is involved with an American reporter, Chris. Mikael falls in love with her even while striking up a friendship with Chris.

Like other fictional works on the Armenian question, such as *Skylark Farm* (2007; *La masseria delle allodole*, 2004) a memoir written by an Italian of Armenian origins, Antonia Arslan, *The Promise* describes initially the life of the wealthy Armenian bourgeoisie whose riches were coveted and whose refinement and success in society were envied, thus partly justifying the hatred of the Turkish population. Moreover the expropriations and seizure of the wealth of the prosperous Armenian community was to be a precious financial support for the war effort. Madden, instead (as Franz Werfel in the epical novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dag*, 1934; *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dag*, 1933) chooses to exclude the privileged classes from her story and sets her novel among destitute people whose situation of hunger and landlord prevarications presents several points of contact with the history of Irish cottagers. The catastrophe that follows is expected and feared by the villagers used to maltreatment and unfairness but comes as a surprise to the wealthy and respected Armenians of *The Promise* or of *Skylark Farm*. When on 24 April 1915, during the roundups

of the most prominent Armenians of the capital, Mikael's uncle is imprisoned, the unbelieving young man, who had avoided conscription in the Ottoman army thanks to his good and powerful Turkish friend, Emre, tries confidently to save his uncle but is detained himself and sent to a prison labour camp from which after many dire vicissitudes, he escapes.

As in *Anyush*, love dominates the first part of *The Promise*. The tale of the triangle may be unconvincing as some critics have noted, because it frustrates the desire to find out more about the genocide taking place in the background, but this is exactly what the director aimed at. "A love story at the centre of a political event is a form that has been used frequently in the history of film" says George in an interview on You Tube. You need a love story to make historical events come to life and awaken the public's empathy. The models he cites, films that "moved him and educated him" are *Casablanca*, David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* or movies by Warren Beatty or Spielberg. The films he prefers are those "that strive to tell the story of an every man or woman that got plunged into a terrible situation (be it in Armenian villages, Rwanda, or English prisons detaining innocent people) and manages to survive and help others survive. "There is no greater story to be told than that".

3.2 Persecution in Action

The second phase of the two tales illustrates the continuation of Dr Stewart's dream with many similarities. "[T]he disappearance of all the old men into the lanes and side streets, followed by the women, and then the young girls and finally the children" (Madden 2014, 371), corresponds euphemistically to the open and continuous violence that has established itself in the villages in the months preceding the actual deportation. In *Anyush*, the period after Jahan's departure is marked by the darkening of the situation. The violence of Ozhan's soldiers is such that people dare not leave their homes, rumours of death-lists circulate, several persons disappear (including Perzik's husband, Vardan) and people try to escape to nearby Batum in Georgia. As Dr Stewart reports: "Our village begins to look like a ghost town. The Armenian houses are empty, the contents stolen and the doors kicked. The few animals left have been taken or butchered so that even the air itself seems to reek of blood. And those that still have homes are being evicted from them" (Madden 2014, 166).

Violence outside the home is duplicated by violence at home. To hide her shame when her pregnancy begins to show and protect and feed her starving family, Anyush accepts to marry her long-time admirer, Husik, the son of the family's rich landlord, Kazbek, a violent man who had beaten his wife to death, had raped Khandut, Anyush's mother, when she was nine and was the informer who had caused the arrest and death of old Alkanian and of many other Armenians of the village. Besides Husik's ferocious love-making, Anyush will have to submit to the imposition of the patriarchal authority Kazbek

exerts over her by beating and even raping her. Only the birth of Lale (tulip in Turkish), a baby with a tulip mark on her chest, will provide some consolation.

Punctually Dr Stewart's journal registers the sad events and the dire poverty of the area "experiencing the worst famine in years. It is depressing to see this once fertile land look as desolate as the Sahara. The grain withers from the root, as if it had been burnt by fire and the people are surviving on wild mustard and turnips" (Madden 2014, 63). The situation is reminiscent of what had happened in Ireland about fifty years before. The missionaries try to grow a vegetable garden and keep some animals to help nourish at least the children and they establish, like the Quakers in Ireland, a soup-kitchen.

In *The Promise* the period of preparation for the deportation march is concentrated in just a few scenes. Mikael returns to Sirun, after escaping adventurously from the camp, to find a replica of what was happening in Mushar. The Turks were threatening and harassing the Armenian townspeople. Out of a sense of duty, he hurriedly marries his ancient betrothed although he is still in love with Ana, and tries to find refuge in a remote area in the mountains. When, however, his wife becomes pregnant and is in danger for her life, he returns to the village leaving her to the care of his mother as he tries to get help from a Red Cross centre nearby where, he discovers, Ana and Christopher are working taking care of Armenian orphans. Along the way back to Sirun, Mikael and his friends discover the site of a massacre where most of his family has died. The active phase of the extermination has started.

3.3 *The Deportation*

In Mushar, an impotent Dr Stewart is the witness of the beginnings of the deportation which he tries to stop and gets beaten himself: "On every road from the village I had witnessed people being herded like cattle: women and children, old people who should have been in their beds, the sick and the frail marching without provisions or water. Many had been walking in bare feet with no protection from the sun" (Madden 2014, 251).

The convoy of Trebizond Armenians is to be escorted by Capt. Orfalea who after eight months of comfortable exile in his elegant home in Istanbul has been re-instated to carry out this unpleasant duty. To make things even worse, he will be supported by the rapist, Captain Ozhan and his regiment. Jahan, who has finally understood that this evacuation is not the necessary relocation to safer regions as he thinks, hopes at least to be able to save or protect Anyush, but their meeting at the village is cold; he discovers she is married and she lets him believe the baby to be her husband's. She distrusts him because he has abandoned her and has accepted this hateful role. "The soldier she had met under the trees was not Jahan. He was a stranger, an instrument of the Government and an officious Turk" (251). Before and during the march she rejects his help. Only when Jahan is thrown off his horse and badly wounded

because of a trick played on him by the Ferrett, does Anyush finally reveal to him that the baby is his and asks him to hide it in the wagon that will carry him away to the hospital where his leg will be amputated. As for herself, she refuses to be taken to safety on that same wagon because she wants to tend her dying grandmother, Gohar. Soon after Jahan's departure, however, the lieutenant urging them to get moving saw that "Gohar's lips were closed, her fingers laced at her breast and two small pebbles covered her eyes" (Madden 2014, 308). In scenes such as these the courage and resilience of Anyush begins to show: she sacrifices her love and safety because blood links are more powerful and her duties regarding her grandmother's death and her daughter's well-being more important.

Scenes such as the preceding one are recurrent in both novel and film. Children, friends, beloved ones like Gohar or Mikael's mother, are left by the road or in the gutter dying or dead and given a hurried funeral at best. Parzik's baby boy is born and abandoned while the mother lies in a wagon consumed by fever. The marchers' clothes are reduced to rags, Gohar was walking with only one shoe. The deportees carry few personal effects and provisions but, even so, along the way they are frequently robbed and have to leave behind anything that slows down their progress. After a few days of marching they are completely destitute. They sleep mostly in the open with no bedding nor shelter. Cholera and dysentery spread through the caravan and the camps. Not only do disease, hunger, dehydration and exposure claim the lives of the Armenian deportees but they are also a target for criminal tribes set loose on them by the authorities, such as the Shota who had a reputation for rape and murder.

The Promise starts with a long shot of the harrowing procession of wagons and marchers, women especially, carrying children in their arms or supporting the elderly. The two works have, actually, many points in common in their descriptions of the deportation of the Armenians, probably because both authors resort to the same visual and written sources, some published genocide memorials but, principally, Wegner's photographs. *Anyush* and *The Promise* put into words and moving pictures the impressions those photographs made on the viewers. In an interview published in *Writing Ireland*, Madden narrates to her interviewer, Margaret Bonass-Madden:

I came across the photographs taken during the genocide by a young German soldier called Armin Wegner, and to say they were heartrending is a gross understatement. Photographs of dead mothers and children, people starved to death or beaten, others marching in a grim line until they fell down from exposure, hunger and exhaustion. Pictures of women crucified, decapitated bodies and horrors so unthinkable as to seem unreal. (Bonass-Madden 2014)

Moreover, George introduces many allusions to other ethnic tragedies putting the Armenian story in the perspective of a history that has disproved the

United Nations' resolution of 1948, and its motto "Never again" by turning it into "again and again". The prisoners herded into train wagons for animals evoke the trains of the Shoah; the capsized boat that provokes Ana's drowning is a clear reference to the present refugee crisis and the deaths by water near Italian or Greek coasts. Looking backward, the adventurous travel towards safety evokes that of Irish immigrants on coffin ships. Episodes from other fictional works are integrated into the film. For instance, Mikael's group joins the refugees of Werfel's masterpiece and fights off with them the Ottoman army on Mussa Dag where Mikael's mother dies. Their armed resistance is another example of resilience as is Khandut's killing a soldier who was about to rape her daughter. Anyush then dons the dead man's clothes and escapes with the help of Jahan's faithful lieutenant, Kadri, braving many dangers. Anyush's will to live and be reunited to her baby will sustain her until she reaches Beyrouth where she will eventually work in an orphanage for Armenian children waiting for the papers that will allow her to emigrate to the United States where she thinks her daughter is with the Stewarts.

As in the case of Madden who uses various real sources, the script of *The Promise* draws much from actual reports for the Associated Press whose fictional author is Chris. He and Ana, play a similar role to that of the Stewarts, in particular by tending a group of orphans as do the American missionaries who, when the deportation starts, take many young children into their house trying to feed and protect them from a cholera epidemic to which even one of their daughters succumbs. Finally the babies are wrenched from their protectors' house with the pretence of taking them back to their parents but they are sown into sacks and thrown into the sea. The orphans of *The Promise*, instead, accompany Ana, Chris and Mikael back to Sirun and then on the road when the latter discovers that most of his family with the exception of his mother, have been massacred by Turkish troops. Most of the orphans die on the way and during the resistance on mount Mussa performing the role children have in this sort of stories, as Dickens knew well, that of evoking heart-wrenching indignation and awakening empathy. The most harrowing scene in the Stewart story is when the children are taken by the soldiers: "Everyone present would remember the moment" (Madden 2014, 299).

Dr Stewart's dream closes with the thought of children: "I am weeping now because I know they will come for the children next [...] I stand in the square alone, watching until the last child has gone" (371). These are also the concluding words of the novel itself: the death of innocent children is the most harrowing topic but in their survival lies a promise for the future. And the children, both in *Anyush* and in *The Promise*, survive. Lale is returned to her mother and together they will emigrate to America as will Yeva, Mikael's niece, and some of the orphans. They will become part of the diaspora and their new life, their smiles but also their memories will be their revenge.

4. Conclusion

The role of novels such as *Anyush* or films such *The Promise* is similar in purpose to that of an international alliance called “Genocide Watch” which is trying to call attention to past and ongoing genocides in the hope of preventing them as is stated about in their *Project No Genocide*:

Despite the development of technology and the Internet in the 21st century, many high-profile crimes against humanity remain silenced, and have not been convicted by the world community. Therefore, our main task is to report the truth about the tragic events that have left a trail of blood in history. Nowadays we recognise them as genocide or tragedy against humanity. After all, we hope that the truth will help to avoid future recurrence of mass ethnic killings. (Stanton 1996)

Genocides do not come in the form of armies facing each other, with use of weapons on both sides, starting with declarations of war and ending with peace treaties. Although the purpose is still that of killing those considered “enemies”, the enemy is a part of the community, different from the majority because of ethnicity, language or religion. The annihilation is often preceded by an Othering process consisting first in vilification, equating for instance its members with animals or considering them wild, dirty, lecherous or treacherous. Hate campaigns are raised with accusations of plotting or betrayal. Then come curtailing of legal rights, imposing penalizing taxes, denial of education and prohibition to own property, bear arms or obtain travel documents. Inter-marriage is forbidden or frowned upon. These are preliminary steps before a state organization proceeds to the extermination of the harassed “Other” by segregation into ghettos, concentration camps, confinement to famine-struck regions, marches or transportation in inadequate vehicles (death-trains or coffin ships) towards destinations that are tantamount to annihilation. Mbembe calls these situations “death worlds” and the government action behind them “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2003, quoted by Petković 2017, 321).

Petković adopts this phrase in her essay on Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea* (2002) applying it both to life on the coffin ship and to the flashbacks of famine-struck Ireland. Madden and George do the same regarding the forced exodus of the Armenian civilian population at the beginning of the past century in Turkey, maybe bearing in mind similar “death worlds” in their own country.

What happened in the Ottoman Empire, as detailed by the two authors, happened in many other societies as well, including English-dominated Ireland. The Ottoman Empire’s attempt to get rid of its minorities mirrors in a magnified way, what has been defined as a “genocidal tendency in the British treatment of the Irish” (O’Neill 2010, 307). While the attempted neutraliza-

tion of the Irish identity was executed mostly through the suppression of its language and culture, it occasionally took the form of quasi-massacres. The confiscation of land with the forceful displacement of local population to a barren west, in the 17th century, deportation in slave-ships of Irish soldiers as indentured-workers, reprisals on private citizens as in the Cromwellian massacre of Drogheda, non-intervention in the case of the Famine, evictions and forced emigration on coffin ships are examples of a similar, though muted, form of ethnic cleansing taking place in Ireland. The ways of the Ottoman Empire, and of its heir, modern Turkey, to get rid of its Armenian and Greek minorities, could be read, when written by an Irish pen, as an allusion or reminder of the problems and injustices suffered by the Irish.

However, in spite of the Herods of this world, some always manage to escape the massacre of the innocents. The people are not suppressed. They survive through their resilience: they form new political entities, create diasporic societies that absorb the best of the old and of the new worlds. They survive in literature, film, music, the visual arts. They survive through memory and in the smile of the children. In spite of some shortcomings, both the novel and the film manage to pass on a message of compassion and hope.

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“The Armenian Genocide and a Genocide of our Own”
In conversation with Martine Madden

DAB: What were the circumstances that led you to write Anyush?

MM: In the late 1980's I lived in Abu Dhabi in the Middle East with my husband and became friends with two Lebanese-Armenian women. When I mentioned that we had honeymooned in Turkey they asked me if I knew about Turkey's role in the Armenian Genocide. I had known next to nothing about it, and they related some of the facts, but I was too young at the time to grasp what they were telling me. Many years later I remembered our conversation and started to do a little digging. That was when I came across Armin Wegner's photographs of the genocide and those pictures were a revelation in the worst possible sense.

DAB: Armin Wegner? The man who denounced the Armenian “martyrdom” in writing and through the photographs he shot, making a case for the creation of an independent Armenian state?

MM: Yes, he was stationed in the Ottoman empire in 1915 and although he is only one of several eye-witnesses who photographed what they saw, he took the vast bulk of the pictures. I remember one of a woman and her two children lying at the edge of the road, all of whom had clearly starved to death. And another of three Armenian doctors hanging from a bridge, where the Turkish soldiers who had killed these men posed nonchalantly for the photograph. It reminded me of the pictures taken by the British and Canadian soldiers who had liberated Bergen Belsen, but unlike the Holocaust, I had known nothing about the Armenian Genocide. My research started from there.

DAB: This, I understand, was your first published book. Had you written anything else before? And of what kind?

MM: I had written a few poems and some articles. This was my first attempt at a novel. The book was published in 2014.

DAB: Did the closeness of the anniversary of the genocide, which started in 2015, influence your choice of an Armenian subject?

MM: Definitely not. I started to write *Anyush* in 2006 when the 100th anniversary was a long way off. Believe me, if I could have had the book written and published earlier, I would have. As it happened it worked out well. There was certainly more interest coming up to the 100th anniversary.

DAB: Are you writing or written anything else? On what subject?

MM: I'm working on a novel set in India at the beginning of last century about a young Indian boy in which a character from *Anyush* makes a brief appearance.

DAB: Are you writing or have written anything about Ireland?

MM: Yes, I'm also working on a book for young adults about the sinking of a ship at the time of the Famine in Kilkee, County Clare.

DAB: Are there any connections between these new projects and the one that led to the writing of Anyush?

MM: Actually I remember thinking while writing *Anyush* that we were very lucky in Ireland never to have experienced something as terrible as the Armenian Genocide. But a little bell was ringing at the back of my mind, and only when I started to research the Irish Famine did I realise that we'd had a genocide of our own. And in many ways it was just as horrible. I had to remind myself that between 1845 and 1852 Ireland lost 4 million people to starvation and emigration. When you see it written in black and white, it's a shocking statistic. Undoubtedly, the British used subtler ways for getting rid of the Irish religious and ethnic minority in their Empire but we might recognize some similarities. I think the British thought of themselves in Ireland as enlightened, benign rulers, and in some respects, they were. But it takes only one or two individuals who have absolute belief in their own superiority and the "natives" inferiority to have a devastating effect. Irish history is littered with them and like the Young Turks who instigated the Armenian Genocide, a handful of men were responsible for the Famine. Some of them, I'm sorry to say, were Irish. So yes, many similarities; deprivation, starvation, bodies in ditches, and emigration leading to a huge diaspora, just like the Armenians.

DAB: Would you then say that apart from compassion, your interest in the Armenian cause was also motivated by your being Irish?

MM: Most of all I think it came from being human. But the Irish certainly have a fellow feeling for the underdog, and the Armenian Genocide moved me in the way that perhaps only the Holocaust previously had.

DAB: Nationalist discourse sees a "genocidal tendency in the British treatment of the Irish" and considers the Great Famine as an unrecognized genocide. Would you agree that the actions of the Ottoman Empire mirror in a magnified way similar propensities in the British?

MM: I certainly agree that the Famine was the greatest tragedy ever to happen in Ireland at the hands of a foreign government. But my sense of both the Armenian Genocide and the Irish Famine, is that they happened for different reasons, and that the Turkish attitude to Armenians was and possibly still is very complex.

3 October 2017 (revised by the author)