ANOTHER PLURALISM: READING DOSTOEVSKY ACROSS
THE SEA OF MARMARA

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ABSTRACT
Reading Fyodor Dostoevsky across the Sea of Marmara, Ottoman-Armenian author, Hagop Oshagan (1883–1948), discovered an unprecedented possibility for conceptualizing and representing non-Muslim Ottoman reality. The following discussion presents this possibility as a case of metacommunal pluralism; a pluralism not based on communally differentiated orthodoxies of ethno-national, linguistic, or confessional singularity, but rather, consisting of heterodoxical pluralities. Oshagan deviates from conventional interpretations, both positive and negative, of Ottoman pluralism as a system of communal differentiation comprised of discrete ethno-confessional units. The Dostoevskyan aspects of Oshagan’s writing suggest, instead, an “underground” of extensive intersectionality that casts the truth of such conventional interpretations of Ottoman communality into doubt, showing the porousness, tensions, limits, and contradictions endemic to Ottoman minority existence.

KEYWORDS: Ottoman Empire, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, Hagop Oshagan, Armenian

Dostoevsky’s Ottoman Destiny

The late twentieth century discovery of Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary critical writings fundamentally redefined the interpretation of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s
ANOTHER PLURALISM

fictional worlds. Identifying Dostoevsky's universe as “profoundly pluralistic,” Bakhtin instituted a conceptual lexicon that has reshaped the course of literary studies and theoretical inquiry into language, culture, identity, politics, and social organization. We owe the now widely recognized possibilities of dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, and unfinalizability to Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky.

Half a century before the “rediscovery” of Bakhtin and his first publication of Problems of Dostoevsky's Art (1929), a non-Muslim Ottoman autodidact read “the demigod of the novel” in a similar vein. Instead of, or perhaps in addition to, polyphony, he found polydoxy; instead of heteroglossia, heterodoxy; and, much as Bakhtin, he discovered the “great dialogue” and the dark underground that revealed Dostoevsky as the master writer of self-consciousness and freedom. Hagop Oshagan (1883–1948), a paragon of Armenian literature hailing from the Ottoman Empire's southern Marmara region, arrived at such insights through French translations of Dostoevsky's works, beginning crucially with the Russian novelist's Notes from the Dead House (1861–1863).

His discovery of Dostoevsky in 1911 occurred at a “threshold time” for Ottoman politics and the politicization of Ottoman-Armenian life. Just three years earlier, the Second Constitutional Revolution, spearheaded by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti), had seemed to herald a new brotherhood of egalitarian pluralism, after toppling Sultan Abdülhamit II's (r. 1876–1909) stifling government. Disillusionment was quick to follow, however, with the counter-revolutionary violence of 1909 confirming the precariousness of Ottoman-Armenians' political future. While no one could yet foresee the genocide that destroyed nearly half of this population during World War I, by 1911, neither could anyone mistake the reigning government’s growing hostility toward its Armenian subjects. Prospects for a pluralist future seemed moot at best, and this uncertainty helped provoke a renewed ideological emphasis on communality rather than coexistence as the dominant paradigm of social survival.

For Armenians, as for others, this took form in emboldened aspirations of national liberation, led by already existing revolutionary parties, especially the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). And, according to contemporary and retrospective commentaries, nothing mobilized or articulated those aspirations as vividly and persistently as Armenian literature; mainly, as these same commentators insist, to this literature's detriment. For example, referring to his own
time in 1913, writer Vrtanes Papazian (1864–1920) observed that “for ten years, the Armenian mind has conceived of very little in terms of an aesthetic objective . . . Of course, political conditions have had a great role in depleting the field.” Oshagan, himself self-avowedly apolitical and nonpartisan, averred repeatedly decades later, “It was an era of enthusiasm, passion, and activism . . . so literature too was obliged to accommodate its objectives to those needs . . . Over and above art, we were preoccupied with our people’s liberation.”

Ottoman-Armenian writers clearly missed the opportunity to write beyond, against, or in lieu of community, and even perhaps intercommunally, during this era of relative discursive freedom.

Bakhtin would have called this missed opportunity the triumph of Enlightenment monologism epitomized by late nineteenth and early twentieth century European and Russian literature. Indeed, politically enthralled Armenian writers modeled their works on such precursors. Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and lesser-known *Le Dernier jour d’un condamné* provided much-loved and -emulated precedents, as did Leo Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* and revolutionary *Haji Murat*. Not coincidentally, Dostoevsky was uniquely overlooked, and unlike the abovementioned, none of his works appears to have been translated into Armenian during this period. It should come as no surprise, then, that Oshagan received Dostoevsky—relatively late, given his precocious and intense reading habits—with immense shock, awe, and even paralysis, when he, by chance, found the author’s works in his good friend, Ardashes Harutyunyan’s (1873–1915) personal library, while teaching in Malgara (present-day Malkara in the Marmara region, Tekirdağ Province). “*Souvenirs d’une maison de mort* [Memoirs from the House of the Dead] is not a book for Oshagan,” confessed the author self-referentially three decades later, “but rather a destiny.”

It was, by Oshagan’s account, an encounter marked by profound identification, such that, as he puts it, “all of the venomous and gushing anguish seared into him [Oshagan13] from youth and childhood would be released from its *circumstantiality*, from the triviality of belonging to someone and would become the paramount meaning of life itself.” Oshagan found himself through Dostoevsky, recognizing among the novelist’s characters the same deprivations and deviations reflected in his own life. But, beyond this personal significance, Oshagan also made the even more fateful—read, influential—observation that “Dostoevsky was the mind and the people,” an observation that he linked directly to Ottoman
minority subjecthood. To that end, he claimed what he “learn[ed] from that [Dostoevsky’s] grueling and awesome work” was “[t]hat life was worth living even in all its gloom:"

. . . . It was that horrible [Dostoevsky’s] world’s beauty, so close to our underground [stornashkhar]. . . . Dostoevsky had, without struggling terribly, discovered life, its primary form, which was something much darker than what was taken as the novelist’s fixation on pessimism. From that world to the Armenian people’s experiences? Oshagan felt that the basic form barely changed. What we were missing was the powerful intellectual pressure (tension) [original French] that transformed the Russian novel’s heroes. But those heroes’ razed trame [original French] was life once again, which differed little between Siberia or . . . Istanbul. The Russian novelist plucked all his power from his simple men, from the moral contraintes [original French] controlling them, most of all from the moral sediment buried deep (underground) [original English] in man, whose regurgitations form our civilization’s errors and bitterest disgrace. . . . In lieu of the Russian nobility, police, and chinovniks, we had the Turk.16

Reading Dostoevsky, then, Oshagan perceived another possibility for conceptualizing and representing non-Muslim Ottoman reality, one that assumes, in Oshagan’s words, “comparability between the Russian people and us.”17 The following discussion presents this possibility as a case of metacommunal pluralism; a pluralism not based on communally differentiated orthodoxies of ethno-national, linguistic, or confessional singularity, but rather, consisting of heterodoxical pluralities. Oshagan thus deviates from conventional interpretations, both positive and negative, of Ottoman pluralism as a system of communal differentiation comprised of discrete ethno-confessional units. The Dostoevskyan aspects of Oshagan’s writing suggest, instead, an “underground” of extensive intersectionality that casts the truth of such Ottoman communality into doubt, showing the porousness, tensions, limits, and contradictions endemic to Ottoman minority existence. Examining the Dostoevskyan aspects of Oshagan’s thematic, narratological, and conceptual concerns discloses not only these metacommunal features, but also their emancipatory function. With Dostoevsky, Oshagan’s work demonstrates a commitment to representing, à la Bakhtin, “the idea” of Ottoman minority subjecthood through a dialogical technique that discursively opposes the individual’s “reification”18 in and through a system of communal identification.
Ottoman communal organization has been historically conceived in terms of the “millet system.” According to this thesis, Ottoman imperial administration managed its heterogeneous domain by identifying and managing its non-Muslim subjects as protected, semi-autonomous communities called millets. Each millet consisted of a distinct religious group (e.g., Orthodox Christian or Jewish) and was internally subdivided along lines of ethnic and linguistic differences. This account emphasizes the importance of “the community” as “the basic organizational unit… without which its [the millet’s] existence was rather inconceivable,” and where “[a] community was a congregation [of people of the same faith] as much as it was a social and administrative unit.”

This viewpoint posits the family as the community’s foundation as well as its institutional modus of cultural preservation and transmission. As “the fusion of the family and the community—the latter can be regarded as an overgrown family—,” the millet “thus provided a sound basis for the preservation of the grass-roots ethnic identity and customs of a given group.”

More detailed studies question this account of the “so-called millet system” or “the communal system,” arguing that it “was not an institution or even a group of institutions, but rather it was a set of arrangements, largely local, with considerable variation over time and place.” Calling it a system merely unifies “a complex mass of unruly historical detail,” creating the false impression of a non-existent “overall administrative system, structure, or set of institutions for dealing with non-Muslims.” Several observations deepen this criticism by focusing on the presumption of a hierarchically delimited communal autonomy prioritizing the significance of a religious divide. But, as Molly Greene stresses, this has resulted in several misled perspectives and conclusions: first, an overemphasis on the role of institutions and laws as the overriding factor in the millets’ constitution; second, these communities’ characterization as self-contained “fortresses that effectively sheltered and disciplined their followers who, in turn, submitted themselves to the authority of their communal leaders”; and, third, an unwillingness to consider non-Muslim individuals’ agency by disregarding the relationship between these communities’ internal dynamics and the non-Muslim individual’s place in Ottoman society.

Studies of Ottoman literary cross-cultural practices complement this revised historical approach in a significant way, specifically by revealing an Ottoman literary culture of syncretism and acculturation. Johann Strauss has uncovered, for example, the multiplicity of late Ottoman (19th–20th century) intersecting public spheres, which resulted in regular literary exchanges,
especially in the realm of drama. As George W. Gawrych demonstrates, the Albanian Şemseddin Sami Bey Fraseri’s (1850–1904) plays and theatrical productions offer a case in point. Sami Bey’s famous play, “Besa yahud Ahde Vefa” (“Pledge of Honor or Loyalty to an Oath”),—poignantly representing Albanian custom while voicing Ottoman patriotism—owes its production in Istanbul to the Armenian director and Muslim convert, Agop Vartovyan (aka Güllü Agop, 1840–1902), who staged the play in 1874 with his mixed Armenian and Turkish repertory. Gawrych similarly points out the pluralist intersections involving the Turkish Namık Kemal’s (1840–1888) famous play, “Vatan veyahud Silistre” (“The Homeland or Silistria”), which not only featured Albanian characters, but also premiered under the Armenian Vartovyan’s direction in 1873. Such occurrences appear to be the rule rather than the exception, since the prominent Turkish writer, “Ahmed Midhat paid the Ottoman Albanian a direct tribute when he assisted Tomas Fasulyeciyon [1842–1901] in presenting on stage in Salonica three of Sami Bey’s plays, including Besa, as the first performances given by the Armenian’s newly founded repertory company.”

Nowhere is this metacommunal reality more evident than in such individuals’ trans-linguistic literary productions, namely works in Karamanlidika, Turco-Cretan, Frangochiotika, and Armeno-Turkish. This translinguistic literary phenomenon has ignited tremendous interest among, especially, Turkish scholars as a counter-discourse to Turkish nationalist (literary) historiographies. It has also provoked none other than former Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to cite it as “a literary reflection of the fact that social elements of [Ottoman] identity were extremely intertwined.” Davutoğlu’s 2015 article, reflecting on the conflicts of Armeno-Turkish history, was referring to what has recently been “discovered” as the first “Turkish” novel. Written in Armeno-Turkish by the Armenian, Vartan Pasha (Hovsep Vartanian, 1813–1879), Akabi Hikayesi (The Story of Akabi, 1851) relates the forbidden love between two Armenians, one Apostolic and the other, Catholic, kept apart by confessional divisions. Interestingly, as it enacts linguistic transversals, the novel also provides a radical critique of communalist dispositions, most importantly, by foregrounding the absurdity of presumed differences such as that which a Catholic Armenian character claims with respect to an Apostolic Armenian, when he asserts: “These people [Armenians] are different from us’… ‘We have more [sic.] better
manners and more elegance." Operative as mediators, palimpsests, and even ideological idioms, such translinguistic authors and texts, as well as their respective multiconfessional, multilingual readership, directly reveal the metacommunal facets of late Ottoman coexistence and complicate the identification of distinct groups along religious, ethnic, or linguistic lines.

Oshagan’s Turks

Oshagan made sense of this complication through his reading of Dostoevsky, and not, surprisingly, through a consideration of the literary–linguistic mélanges discussed above. Himself an astonishingly knowledgeable literary historian, Oshagan was undoubtedly at least aware of, if not well-read, in many of these publications. His own 10-volume Hamapatker Arevntabay Grakanut’yan (Panorama of Western Armenian Literature, 1944), however, conforms to the general nationalist trend, focusing exclusively on Armenian-language writers without addressing deviations from this linguistic norm. Whether an oversight or an intentional exclusion, this linguistic exclusivity nonetheless contradicts his contemporaneous review of Leon Surmelian’s English-language autobiographical work, I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen (1945). Here, Oshagan commends his erstwhile student, and otherwise Armenian-language poet, for a work that captures the “Armenian Spirit” of the late Ottoman Empire and its survival through war, genocide, and exile.

Notwithstanding Panorama’s Western Armenian exceptionalism, his literary history does, similarly, engage the multiplicity of being Ottoman-Armenian and, moreover, self-consciously affirms Oshagan’s own existential variation as this experience’s self-avowedly representative author. In a fictional Dostoevskyan exchange, for example, in this same history’s autobiographical and autocritical tenth volume, Oshagan speaks directly to that experience. He suggestively imitates his critical readers’ perplexity, asking, “Which people’s representative was this man?” And he responds with the observation, “They posed the question, but they didn’t dare deny him his Armenianness.” Oshagan’s sense of Armenianness, then, as a writer, and, moreover, as an Ottoman-Armenian subject, here connotes his ethno-national identity’s mutability, which becomes even more explicit where he states: “In the village, Oshagan experienced the Armenian. In the city, the Turk. . . . In Western Armenian literature, Oshagan is the exceptional specimen of these two different systems. His soul . . . has managed to draw its elements, one drop at a time, from village and city, from Armenian and Turk.”
His readers’ presumed uncertainty regarding Oshagan’s communal belonging ostensibly proceeds from his novels’ extensive inclusion of that identity’s counterpoint, namely Turkishness, or “the Turk.” Oshagan’s novels, featuring or entirely dedicated to Turkish protagonists, make a revolutionary intervention in modern Armenian literature. As Vahé Oshagan (1922–2000), son of Hagop and himself a prominent critic and poet rightly observes, “[F]or the first time in Armenian letters, a Turk is shown to be a normal human being capable of holding rational discourse [. . .] ‘No man can be inhuman,’ says the author [Oshagan]; and this fact humanizes, even transforms totally, the stereotyped image of a cold-blooded beast that had persisted [in Armenian literature] for sixty years.” Oshagan’s interpreters have either overlooked or, contradicting V. Oshagan, they have taken an overwhelmingly conservative approach to the Turkish aspects of Oshagan’s work. Reading Oshagan’s Turks in binary terms, they have emphasized the irreconcilability between his Armenian and Turkish characters, presuming essentialized representations (i.e., “the character of the Turk” and “the character of the Armenian”) and, moreover, validating them.

Such approaches are, to some extent, understandable. Oshagan does repeatedly write in anger with sometimes outright racialist terms about Turkish domination and violence. That stated, he also aims his rancor toward Armenians, while reserving his greatest rage for European thinkers and politicians. Characterizing Oshagan’s declamations as anti-Turkish hatred, misrepresents his thought. As the writer himself lucidly explains with reference to Dostoevskys, his seemingly offensive outrage explodes from an existential confrontation with the Turkish genocidal agenda, and not from racist ideology. Comparing Turkish domination to the Russian system, Oshagan writes:

In their life’s outward facade, Turks resemble the average man, but the depths of that life’s bowels still haven’t been plumbed. One who goes through the Russian novel is obliged to change his lens or, at least, his perspective on man; but he doesn’t depart from man, and, at worst, depressed by that woeful refuse, he pities it. Anyone who has known the Turk cannot even find solace in that. Dostoevskys heroes are men even in their crimes. Those who saw the Turks turning the collective crime of slitting unarmed people’s throats into ecstasy can’t comprehend the world in any other light. Does that clarification suffice . . . so that Oshagan’s pessimism doesn’t get mistaken for an academic standpoint? Moreover, one must take into account the fact that between Oshagan’s two personae sprawls not only the world’s
most horrifying atrocity [yeghernakordzutyun], which eliminated half his people’s population, but also the prostitution of a Europe for which his admiration turned into boundless disillusionment during those years.45

Oshagan was fortunate to survive those atrocities by hiding underground in Istanbul for four years, while most of his friends and colleagues met their deaths in prison camps or on deportation routes.46 This undeniable reality goes a significant way toward explaining his scathing commentaries on Turkish violence and some of his Turkish protagonists’ negative characterizations. It is equally undeniable, however, that Oshagan draws on a reservoir of friendship, sympathy, and love to depict some of his novels’ key Turkish figures, especially the eponymous protagonists of Süleyman Effendi (1933) and Haji Abdullah (1933). He claimed to know both personally as the real-life inspirations for his novels’ heroes. And he evidently shared an intimate friendship with the former, Süleyman Effendi, with whose father, Edhem Bey Zade—the same novel’s antagonist—also he was closely acquainted. He writes, “Oshagan knew that man [Edhem Bey Zade], has dined at his table (thanks to his relationship with his son [Süleyman Effendi]) and has shuddered at hearing the story of how he attempted to murder his hysterical wife as it was relayed by his son, a Turk of light and sacrament.”47 He also describes Haji Abdullah sympathetically in this same section as “that lovely man,”48 whom he’d met in or around 1901 while briefly imprisoned together in Bursa. And beyond friendship and sympathy, he notes, incidentally, a romantic involvement as an example of his close associations with Ottoman–Turkish contexts. He explains: “He [Oshagan] hasn’t researched Turkish custom by taking notes for the sake of making ethnographic collections. He knows the Turkish woman, in that word’s archaic sense.”49

Love and terror, sympathy and resentment, friendship and alienation materialize in equal measure among Oshagan’s Turkish characters, resulting in their multivalent representations. This fact hasn’t gone unnoticed, arousing even his conservative readers’ attention to the writers’ apparent identification or infatuation with his most unsympathetic Turkish characters. Shushig Dasnabedian observes, for example, that Oshagan is “attracted to” and even “identifies with” his “scoundrel hero,” Edhem Bey Zade.50 Likewise, Rubina Peroomian perceives Oshagan’s clear affinity for his most notorious perpetrator, Mehmet Süreyya Effendi, in a 100-page long dialogue cum interrogation with the Armenian revolutionary, Matik Melikkhanian.51 “Matik’s silence substantiates such an interpretation,” writes Peroomian,52 while Mehmet Süreyya, modeled on Oshagan’s erstwhile interrogator, dominates the scene.
**The Idea of the “Armenian-Turk”**

As Oshagan employs personal history to innovate these radically layered depictions, he draws directly on Dostoevsky’s idea of doubling to go a step further: namely, to characterize the “Armenian-Turk.” Conceptualizing and presenting this figure is precisely one of Oshagan’s chief aims in devoting so much of his novels to the Ottoman–Turkish element. Hence, his explanation: “Oshagan’s novel has demonstrated extensive interest toward Turkish customs. There’s nothing surprising in that. The Western Armenian community has at no time lived itself. Its life has been doubled by the Turk.”

Revealing this doubling as the “Armenian-Turk,” then, is his novels’ ultimate objective; one achieved by thoroughly including the Turkish constituent, so as precisely to explore and expose Armenian-Turkish imbrications.

But, although Oshagan animates this controversial and unprecedented term repeatedly throughout his critical writings, he leaves the “Armenian-Turk” relatively unexplained. He reserves its only pointed but nebulous elaboration for a lengthy footnote in *Panorama X*, where he begins to theorize “the idea” as one of his chief novelistic principles. He writes:

In 1900, we didn’t have the means to organize a life of the mind, when our bodies’ masters still existed in the form of the Turk and the Armenian-Turk. And our novel recognized the burden of our national anguish, the double-edged sword of existence/non-existence . . . But censorship prohibited us from carrying these issues into our art . . . This is why Oshagan’s novel has the Armenian-Turk issue as its basis, with all its shocking magnitude. Don’t say that this is a social issue rather than an intellectual one.

What Oshagan suggests here is that the crisis of Armenian thought and art stems from the prohibition against any open and sustained conceptualization—in its totality—of being Ottoman-Armenian; a totality that included the simultaneous (cultural, social) fusion and (ethno-national, political) split of Armenian and Turk. Oshagan’s novels prioritize the Armenian-Turk issue, then, in order to redress the genocidal rupture that would and did force Armenians’ sense of a plural Ottoman subjecthood into oblivion.

Dostoevsky proved indispensable for Oshagan’s efforts to represent this pluralist experience in its full complexity and contradiction. Although, doubtless, unfamiliar with Bakhtin, Oshagan nonetheless interpreted the function of “the idea” in Dostoevsky’s work in almost exactly the same
way; notably, in Bakhtin’s words, as “a live event, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses.” In this account, the idea neither arises in nor belongs to a single individual, but is, rather, “inter-individual and inter-subjective,” emerging from “dialogic communion between consciousnesses.” Bakhtin concludes: “As a result of such an ideological approach, what unfolds before Dostoevsky is not a world of objects, illuminated and ordered by his monologic thought, but a world of consciousnesses mutually illuminating one another, a world of yoked-together semantic human orientations . . . The cognizant and judging ‘I,’ and the world as its object, are present there not in the singular but in the plural.”

Oshagan, too, drawing on Dostoevsky, defines the idea as a pluralist or a dialogical event, devoting an entire subsection entitled, “Ideology,” to its examination in Panorama X’s chapter on himself as “The Novelist” (“Vipoghē”). He repeatedly prefaces his statements with the fact that ideas could not take shape in his novels as they do in Dostoevsky’s, as a result of sociopolitical conditions. But, he also maintains that his novel is the first in Armenian literature to approach the idea in the Dostoevskyan sense, not as a preformed system of thought, but rather as an “element that is subject to life.” Ohsagan here cites The Karamazov Brothers as a prime example in which no single predetermined idea or ideology can be isolated as the novel’s chief conceptual paradigm. And, by comparison, he highlights his own similar ideological achievement in the novel Remnants, where the Turkish prison warden, Mehmet Süreyya Effendi, conducts a “heated dialogue [original French]” with the Armenian revolutionary, Matig Melikkhanian, over the course of 100 pages.

Oshagan’s emphasis on this dialogue as a great ideological achievement suggests that whatever ideas emerge in this scene do so as a result of, in Bakhtin’s terms, a dialogic communion between consciousnesses, or an inter-subjective, interindividual encounter. In other words, these ideas emerge from the meeting of Armenian and Turk, and in that sense, the ideas themselves constitute plural phenomena representative of an Armeno-Turkish fusion. Following Dostoevsky’s nonteleological, nonempiricist approach, Oshagan here proposes an Ottoman world of yoked-together semantic orientations, where the emergent Ottoman subject or “I” and its imperial context are present “not in the singular but in the plural”—not as Armenian or Turk, but as these two presumed identities’ interlinked multiplication. Oshagan suggestively confirms this point where he states, “Before becoming thought, philosophical systems are expressions of dispositions [kharnvadzkner].” He uses the Armenian word, kharnvadzk, rooted in kharnel—to mix—to denote “disposition.” And he,
therefore, alludes to the mixtures that resulted in the dispositions of Ottoman subjecthood. Oshagan posits that this mixture, namely the Armenian-Turk issue, became the primary constituent of Ottoman-Armenian thought, a veritable “mystique” that permeated the entirety of this population's experiences between the two World Wars, but that was subsumed into the liberationist visions of Armenian revolutionary nationalism.

Prisons of Freedom

Oshagan avers, time and again, that his preoccupation with conceptualizing the Armenian-Turk is a matter of freedom. His main, self-proclaimed objective toward that aim is to characterize Ottoman-Armenian subjectivity as an experience that far exceeds its reduction to an ideologically predetermined figure of imperial subjection without, however, disregarding the reality of Hamidian-era repression. Oshagan's postgenocide writing casts the Armenian-Turk as a paradoxical figure embodying both subjection (as the dominated constituent in a hierarchically organized communal system) and liberation (as the transgressive subject of metacommunal pluralism). The author indeed privileges this paradoxicality as the Armenian-Turk's underground path of liberation through subjection, wherein metacommunal transgression becomes possible as a result of communal identification cum domination. Oshagan thus posits a quintessentially Dostoevskyan understanding of freedom, and one that he must have conceived at his very first 1909 encounter with the novelist's world in Notes from the Dead House. The semiautobiographical prison novel is where Dostoevsky first reveals this philosophical standpoint—the “freer freedom in prison,” per Svetlana Boym's shorthand—voicing it through one of his double-narrators, the wife-murderer, Goryanchikov. Regarding his condemnation to the Siberian penal colony, Goryanchikov states:

Here is the end of my wandering; I am in prison! I constantly repeated to myself; ‘here is my anchorage for many long years . . . But who knows? Perhaps when, after many years, the time comes for me to leave it, I shall be sorry to go! . . .” I added, not without an element of malignant pleasure which is sometimes almost a craving to reopen one's wounds—as though one could be in love with one's own pain, as though one found true pleasure in the realization of the full extent of one's misery. In consequence of our
day dreaming and our long divorce from it, freedom appeared to us here [in prison], somehow freer than real freedom, that exists in fact, in real life.66

Equating Goryanchikov with Dostoevsky—who based the work on his own 10-year conviction in Siberia—Boym interprets this passage as the novelist’s manifesto for suffering toward the “antipolitical”67 utopia of a “national bonding experience,”68 which is, she moreover asserts, “[a]t its core . . . the dream of national grandeur and reconciliation without boundaries.”69 As his thematic and narratological appropriations of the same novel reveal, Oshagan’s reading differs significantly. He certainly does not conflate narrator with author, explicitly distinguishing between them in the architecture of his impressionistic semiautobiographical story, “Mahuvan Tzaghikner”70 (“Flowers of Death,” 1921). Based on the four years he spent living underground as a fugitive in Istanbul during the First World War, Oshagan here adopts the same narrative structure that frames Dead House, consisting of two narrators, one who writes the notes, while the other collates and edits them; but, as Krikor Beledian observes,71 neither one being representative of the author, Oshagan, who appears for the first time as a new penname in that same story’s concluding signature.

Oshagan’s narratological insight into the internal multiplications of Dead House determines his second interpretative departure from Boym on the question of imprisonment’s freedoms. Whereas Boym emphasizes the melancholic inversion of pleasure and pain in her interpretation of the “freer freedom,” Oshagan—who’d experienced imprisonment not only as an underground fugitive, but also as a multiple Ottoman convict both pre- and mid-genocide—discerned the inevitability of multiplication and doubling as the (potential) freedom of prison. Goryanchikov clearly expresses that sense of multiplication in the abovecited passage where the prisoner’s unique sense of freedom does not, contrary to Boym’s assertion, follow from a self-empowering reappropriation of pain. Rather, imprisonment reduplicates the prisoner’s experience of freedom, because what was once lived as fact and reality becomes lived as appearance (“appeared to us”) through its repeatedly daydreamed remembrances and fantasies. The prisoner feels this “freer freedom,” because prison enforces its fantasized reduplication as both a longed-for past and a future. And, in so doing, in compelling the prisoner to repeatedly recall and reimagine being free, prison provokes the prisoner to reconstruct—thus, to multiply—himself as the agent of such freedom, both known subjectively in the past and presumed hopefully for the future. The sense of a freer freedom in prison, then, originates from the
prisoner’s inevitable drive and activity of self-reconstruction and subjective duplication. Dostoevsky’s Goryanchikov voices that existential compulsion while reflecting on prison’s psychological effects:

> From the very first day of my life in prison, I began to dream of freedom. To calculate in a thousand different ways when my days in prison would be over became my favourite occupation. It was always in my mind, and I am sure that it is the same with everyone who is deprived of freedom for a fixed period. I don’t know whether the other convicts thought and calculated as I did, but the amazing audacity of their hopes impressed me from the beginning. The hopes of a prisoner deprived of freedom are utterly different from those of a man living a natural life. A free man hopes, of course (for a change of luck, for instance, or the success of an undertaking), but he lives, he acts, is caught up in the world of life. It is very different with the prisoner. There is life for him too, granted—prison life—but whatever the convict may be and whatever may be the term of his sentence, he is instinctively unable to accept his lot as something positive, final, as part of real life. Every convict feels that he is, so to speak, not at home, but on a visit.  

By Goryanchikov’s account, obsessive dreams of freedom pluralize prisoners’ subjectivity by intensifying prison experience as an interruption of lived time. Fantasies of freedom rupture prisoners’ sense of subjective continuity, so that they undergo conviction and confinement as a polarized duplication of self, while they also “instinctively” perceive reality as a mirrored duality. A freer freedom in prison may thus be interpreted with reference to such duplication and multiplication, rather than with respect to willful, redemptive suffering. Unlike the free man, who integrates into, and, in a sense, adapts to a stable preexisting metaphysical continuum, the prisoner experiences himself as a dynamic ontological interface. Thus, contrary to prison’s prescribed moral mandate to uniformly rehabilitate and assimilate, the prisoner’s self-duplicating freedom-dreams instead defy such imposed conformity to a predefined community. As he constantly redefines himself through his hopes, he cannot be fully subjected to prison’s totalizing authority.

The double-narrator structure of *Dead House* vividly illustrates this process, specifically by inscribing irreconcilable contradictions about Goryanchikov and the nature of his prison notes. For example, the novel’s actual content challenges the unidentified framing narrator’s claim that Goryanchikov’s manuscript consisted of “a disconnected description . . .
interspersed by passages from another story, some strange and terrible reminiscences, jotted down irregularly, spasmodically, as though by some overpowering impulse," possibly "written in a state of insanity." Goryanchikov begins with his entry and general introductions to prison life—for example, the first part’s three sections on “First Impressions”—continues with closer examinations of certain convicts and their crimes (Petrov, Lutchka, Baklushin) and some of the prison’s distinctive features and customs (Christmas, theatricals, the hospital, and prison animals), and he concludes with his own release. Rather than an unstable, erratic mind, Goryanchikov’s meticulously detailed observations and consistently objective tone suggest, instead, an individual of remarkable poise and self-restraint. Moreover, the novel’s twenty-one chapters and over 300 pages contradict the unidentified narrator’s claim to reproducing only “two or three chapters as an experiment.” This narrator’s apparent errors or misconstruals also cast his other observations, specifically regarding Goryanchikov’s taciturn, “unsociable,” “queer,” and “aloof” disposition, into doubt. Returning to this introduction after completing Goryanchikov’s main account undermines this nameless witness’s conclusions that the ex-convict behaved as though “he was his own enemy” by undermining his best interests.

Oshagan interpreted and appropriated this feature of the unreliable narrator in Dead House, along with the novel’s other internal narratological contradictions, as a technique of unfinalizability in the Bakhtinian sense. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s “hero from the underground… seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself this final word about himself, the word of his self-consciousness, in order to become in it that which he is not. His consciousness of self lives by its unfinalizability, by its unclosedness and its indeterminacy” (emphasis added). The unclosedness and indeterminacies of Dead House achieve a similar aim as the underground hero’s self-consciousness, by ensuring the prisoner Goryanchikov’s unfinalizability or independence through his identity’s multiplication. Of particular import for Oshagan is the fact that Goryanchikov’s unfinalizability works to defy any fixed communal affiliation, and thus assures his freedom from any totalizing system. Goryanchikov has cut off his ties to friends and family and disdains or avoids integration into Siberia’s ex-convict community. It is through this reclusiveness, however, that he paradoxically forges a profound, emotional tie to his new place of residence by developing a strong bond with his landlady’s fatherless granddaughter, an illegitimate child, as her tutor. Rather than madness, as the unnamed narrator suggests, this solitariness inspires the creativity and insight that his own narrative ultimately evinces.
This very same dynamic materializes in Oshagan’s enigmatic, impressionistic work, “Flowers of Death,” mentioned earlier. As already noted, Oshagan directly adopts the dual-narrative format of *Dead House*. We learn from the unnamed narrator, that he has reproduced the contents of a notebook left behind by a fugitive, effectively a prisoner, hiding in the house of a lone old woman in Istanbul during the genocide. Unlike Dostoevsky’s unnamed narrator, however, Oshagan’s fully identifies with the notebook’s author. He describes himself as a fellow underground fugitive, who finds refuge in the same house as his mysterious predecessor, where he finds the notebook. This narrator asserts in both the framing preface and post-face that he has presented the text, contrary to its writer’s explicit wishes, “intact” and unedited, “just as these lines have emerged in their first outpouring.”81 In adopting this Dostoevskyan structure, Oshagan interestingly reverses the dual narrators’ roles. Here, the critical, untrustworthy, and misconstruing voice of Dostoevsky’s unnamed narrator becomes that of Oshagan’s main narrator. This Goryanchikov-equivalent provides his own preface and post-face, where he repeatedly disparages the written contents as the disconnected ravings of a “sickly”82 mind, in desperate need of editorial revision.83 The actual work contradicts its writer’s self-criticism, however, proving instead its stranger-reader’s more generous claim that the text captures the birth of a new author with an unprecedented voice, “a new language and a new energy.”84

What makes the work self-consciously and self-reflexively new is its formlessness. Styled as a love letter to an illusion, it illustrates the narrator’s passion for a muse-like woman over the course of twelve reflective and seemingly stream-of-consciousness sketches. These otherwise disconnected sections are interlinked by the overarching themes of intimacy between strangers and the potential for creativity and freedom through confinement. The tone indicates an unmistakably young, male narrator, although the reality of the beloved’s figure remains uncertain. Some concrete details suggest that she might be the actual owner or inhabitant of the fugitive-narrator’s hideout, while more symbolic passages seem to evoke an imaginary entity or a metaphor. This uncertainty serves to further the text’s aim—and its narrator’s insistent “desire”—“to erase differences, melt the flesh, engulf divisions” so that “you cease to be you, and you meld [kharnvadz] with the soul of the one on your lap, assimilated [tsulvadz], a newly created being.”85

This expression of romantic desire for union suddenly assumes political significance, especially given the work’s self-declared genocidal context—signed “March 1916”86—when “[m]en are hanged now for the pleasure of those testing the rope. Boys and old men cease to live, being sacrificed for
bliss in eternity.”

But, “Souls can be sisters,” writes the narrator, and presents a metaphor of thwarted union between two violets “divided by a dry leaf, which an unaware gust of wind, in a moment of madness, placed between their stems. And the scents from the chalices of the two flowers waft to each other, but the lips of their petals die of thirst.” “I don’t know why these images come to me,” states the narrator, and responds indirectly, through a provocative association with the following statement: “A leaf, thrown by the wind, is murderous, just as the great hatreds that repel nations from each other. What, between us and the violets, is the same and unlike. Why do those condemned to death like to see it this way?”

The explicit metaphor of two violets as two nations—here, clearly Armenian and Turk—insinuates a synthesis or, at the minimum, a strong attraction and likeness, that is violently divorced, and even destroyed, by an invincible, destructive intervention. Tellingly, the narrator’s state of captivity is what prompts these observations and arouses his further lament: “Why should people be obliged to conceal what cannot be concealed, that lightning which flashes from the currents flowing between their souls, when everything in this world needs so much light? Why should two souls, drawn to each other, be compelled to restrain, almost to stifle whatever the winds can communicate to other winds, whatever two flowers, side-by-side, send each other without reserve . . .?”

The text’s insistent and self-avowed formlessness attempts to subjectively preserve and reclaim the very synthesis being sundered in the objective world of forms. Hence, the narrator’s claims in the sketch entitled, “Parë” (“The Word”), that he has written this “entanglement” as an indecipherable “enigma”; or, that he has intentionally absented the word from this work; and, that “[o]n these pages, the word has not put on form.” The text’s significance rests on this resistance to form and concomitant emphasis on the word as the source of intensity and impression. Along with its multiple unnamed narrators, missing identities, and illusive, duplicated figures, this deliberately formless and form-resistant piece enacts an anti-identitarian utopia, where two irresistibly attracted violets, like their politico-metaphorical correlatives—Armenian and Turk—can experience the freedom of synthesis. Here, identification signals captivity, which can only be overturned by recalling and animating a fundamental, originary, and forgotten plurality. Not coincidentally, like Dostoevsky’s Goryanchikov, Oshagan’s narrator devises and experiences a freer freedom in prison through self- and other-duplicating fantasies that subvert the (genocidal) ideals of sociopolitical belonging. And he, too, therefore, defies the totalizing authority of identification.
Conclusion: The Novel of Synthesis

In Oshagan’s (re-)interpretation of the Dostoevskyan penitentiary, prison becomes a plural(izing) space of metacommunal fusion and self-consciousness. This, then, partly explains why all but one of Oshagan’s novels take prisoners and imprisonment as their themes. And, it also clarifies his method for the structure of 101 Years, a prison triptych, whose three novels, states the author, begin with “epilogues.”93 That is, they begin with the conclusion that is their respective prisoner-protagonists’ incarceration, familiarizing us at the novels’ outset with the “fundamental event or factor, which has led those heroes to that cell.”94 This, then, frees us readers “to walk along with the novel’s heroes, having partly forgotten the psychological state induced by reading a novel, we’ll take all the human compulsions of their passions, agonies, misfortunes, and we’ll make them ours, and instead of following the presentation with our minds, we’ll take on a role in that drama, without realizing what we are doing.”95 That the heroes of 101 Years are, by and large, Turks significantly nuances what may otherwise appear as Oshagan’s simple invitation to enlist his readers’ extreme empathy with his novels’ characters and events. Taking on, as one’s own, the passions, agonies, and misfortunes of Haji Abdullah, Suleyman Effendi, and their victims and perpetrators, requires the correspondence of Armenian (reader) and Turk (character). Such a correspondence is inevitable even in the case of Haji Murat. As the cycle’s only Armenian hero, he personifies the Armenian-Turk with his interchangeably Armenian and Turkish name, “Murat”; his transgressive passion for a Muslim woman; and his “adoption” as a “lion[s] of a kindred race”96 by his counterparts among Turkish bandits.

These metacommunal elements in Haji Murat are pervasive throughout all of Oshagan’s novels. And their centrality elucidates the author’s often-enigmatic comments about his novelistic methodology as a process of freedom. Describing the novel as a “free composition”97 and an “open page,”98 Oshagan claims, for example, “I have repeated so many times, that for me, the novel is a sacred undertaking presenting every possibility.”99 That possibility is overwhelmingly synthesizing, for Oshagan explicitly characterizes his novels as “synthetic”100 (hamatragan) or constituting a “synthetic world.”101 The novelist thus effectively equates synthesis with freedom, demonstrating his Dostoevskyan commitment to what Bakhtin calls a “profound pluralism” with soteriological aims. Working against his era’s overwhelming nationalist currents, Oshagan thought and sought...
freedom—via Dostoevsky—in the intercommunal, interreligious, and intersubjective reality of having been and continuing to be the synthesis of Armenian and Turk.

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Notes

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5. Booth, “Introduction,” xxix. (Subsequent citations as Pan X followed by page number.)
12. Oshagan, Pan X, 45.
14. Oshagan, Pan X, 44.
15. Ibid., 45.
16. Ibid., 84.
17. Ibid., 193.
20. Ibid., 143.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 74.
25. Ibid., 10.
27. Strauss, “Who Read” 53ff. Following Strauss, Börte Sagaster acknowledges that during the Ottoman Reform period, the separation between Muslim Turkish communities and non-Muslim communities was narrower than conventionally thought. See Börte Sagaster, “The Role of Turcophone Armenians as Literary Mediators of Culture in the Early Days of Modern Turkish Literature,” in Between Religion and Language: Turkish-Speaking Christians, Jews and Greek-Speaking Muslims and Catholics in the Ottoman Empire, ed. Evangelia Balta and Mehmet Ölmmez (Istanbul, Turkey: Eren, 2011), 101.
29. Ibid., 530.
30. Ibid., 531.
31. See Between Religion and Language for extensive discussions about this phenomenon.
32. Cited in Murat Cankara, “Reading Akabi, (Re-)Writing History: On the Questions of Currency and Interpretation of Armeno-Turkish-Fiction,” in Cultural Encounters in the Turkish-Speaking Communities of the Late Ottoman Empire, ed. Evangelia Balta (Istanbul, Turkey: Isis, 2014), 54.
Minorities and the Literary Canon in Turkey,” in Neither Shiraz nor Paris: Papers on Modern Turkish Literature (İstanbul, Turkey: Isis, 2005).
38. Oshagan, Pan X, 59.
39. Ibid., 528.
41. Krikor Beledian, a foremost scholar of Oshagan’s work, for example, mentions virtually nothing about Oshagan’s Turkish protagonists in his literary critical volume, Mari, despite devoting several hundred pages to the novelists’ work.
43. Even where the porosity of Armeno-Turkish identities has been suggested, it has been made strictly with references to Turkish domination, for example, Marc Nichanian, Le Roman de la Catastrophe (Geneva, Switzerland: Mētis Presses, 2006).
45. Oshagan, Pan X, 84. See also Oshagan, Pan X, 139 for a similar statement.
47. Oshagan, Pan X, 135.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 157.
51. The revolutionary Matik is the eponymous hero of another memoir-esque novel, Matig Melikhanyan, which was serialized in the literary journal, Pakine (Beirut), in 1974–1975.
52. Peroomian, 199.
53. Oshagan, Pan X, 156.
54. Ibid., 170–71. He makes a similar point on 177.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 97.
59. Ibid., 99.
60. Oshagan, *Pan X*, 73–74. He repeats this point on 181–82.
61. Ibid., 170.
62. Ibid.
63. He makes a similar statement in *Pan X*, 178.
65. Ibid., 182.
67. Ibid., 114.
68. Ibid., 112.
69. Ibid., 114.
70. “Flowers of Death,” 1921.
73. Ibid., 5.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 2.
76. Ibid., 3.
77. Ibid., 2–3.
80. Ibid., 3.
83. Ibid., 484.
84. Ibid., 435.
85. Ibid., 442.
86. Ibid., 484.
87. Ibid., 449.
88. Ibid., 453.
89. Ibid., 453.
90. Ibid., 469.
91. Ibid., 478.
92. Ibid., 479.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., 221.
99. Ibid., 146.
100. Ibid., 105.
101. Ibid., 108.