

William Saroyan Centennial AUA (2015)

Saroyan is famously quoted as saying that he was an Armenian writer who happened to write in English. “I wrote working-class Armenian writing in English.” I wonder what he would have thought about the American University of Armenia? I think he’d have smiled and he’d have been glad. After all some of his earliest work was published by an Armenian institution, the *Hayrenik*, founded by Armenian diasporans, *Dashnaktsutyun* (ARF) to be specific, to encourage Armenian intellectual and cultural life. Over the years, the *Hayrenik* published his work in the best tradition of Armenian openness and universality, making room for English discourse in the Armenian reality.

Saroyan epitomized the saying that the style is the man. He created a tone, manner, and voice of his own, that has been dubbed Saroyanesque. It is full of optimism, zest for life, awe of God, irreverence for authority, disdain toward bullies, compassion for humanity and a deeply Christian understanding of the human condition. Writing is about voice. On hearing an Armenian singer from Moush, Saroyan said, “So that’s what it is to be an Armenian. That open-voice, field voice, wind-voice, voice of the plains.” That voice was the one that had sympathetic resonance for him.

It’s a bit pointless to talk about writers who write better than we’ll ever talk about them. Far better to let them speak for themselves in their own words. In that spirit, I’ve put together a collage of Saroyan’s words and thoughts, which I’d like to share with you as a tribute to a great Armenian writer and a great American writer, whose spirit continues to dwell, I think, in the vision that inspired this institution.

I hope this will pique your curiosity and in the coming weeks Saroyan’s wish to be heard again and again will become a reality here at AUA and in Armenia. Somehow, I think he wanted more than simply for his words to be heard. He wanted hearers to bring them to life.

A writer wants what he has to say to be heard again and again. He wants it to be heard after he is dead.

1952 The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills

It is the heart of man that I am trying to imply in this work.

Seventy Thousand Assyrians 1934

Every man in the world is better than someone else and not as good someone else.

The Resurrection 1935

The child race is fresh, eager, interested, innocent, imaginative, healthy and full of faith, where the adult race, more often than not, is stale, spiritually debauched, unimaginative, unhealthy, and without faith.

My Heart's in the Highlands 1939

I believe there are ways whose ends are life instead of death.

Antranik and the Spirit of Armenia, 1936

Good people are good because they've come to wisdom through failure. – Saroyan

I have made a fiasco of my life, but I have had the right material to work with.

My Heart's in the Highlands 1939

You betray honor, you betray yourself, you betray the human race when you believe the way to truth is in the way taken by the mob, when you agree because it's convenient, when you accept, when you conform, when you don't go after truth as if it had never before been seized.

Here Comes there Goes You know Who, p. 49

The order I found was the order of disorder.

1952 The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills

The real story can never be told. It is untellable. The real (as real) is inaccessible, being gone in time. There is no point in glancing at the past, in summoning it up, in re-examining it, except on behalf of art - that is, the meaningful-real.

The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills 1952

It is impossible not to notice that our world is tormented by failure, hate, guilt, and fear.

1946 Letter to Robert E. Sherwood

“The role of art is to make a world which can be tolerated.”

The Human Comedy 1943

In the most commonplace, tiresome, ridiculous, malicious, coarse, crude, or even crooked people or events I had to seek out rare things, good things, comic things, and I did so.

The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills 1952

I was never interested in the obvious, or in the details one takes for granted, and everybody seemed to be addicted to the obvious, being astonished by it, and forever harping about the details which I had long ago weighted, measured, and discarded as irrelevant and useless. If you can measure it, don't. If you can weigh it, it isn't worth the bother. It isn't what you're after. It isn't going to get it. My wisdom was visual and as swift as vision. I looked, I saw, I understood, I felt, “That's that, where do we go from here?”

Here Comes There Goes You Know Who

No foundation. All the way down the line. No foundation.

The Time of Your Life

Every man alive in the world is a beggar of one sort or another, every last one of them, great and small. The priest begs God for grace, and the king begs for something. Sometimes he begs the people for loyalty, sometimes he begs God to forgive him. No man in the world can have endured ten years without having begged God to forgive him.

The Beggars

You must remember always to give, of everything you have. You must give foolishly even. You must be extravagant. You must give to all who come into your life. Then nothing and no one shall have power to cheat you of anything, for if you give to a thief, he cannot steal from you, and he himself is then no longer a thief. And the more you give, the more you will have to give.

The Human Comedy

Neither love nor hate, nor any order of intense adherence to personal involvement in human experience, may be so apt to serve the soul as this freedom and this necessity to be kind.

1952 The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills

What is the purpose of human life? On the animal level it is certainly to avoid pain if possible. If it is not possible, then on the human level it is in order to put up with pain decently. On the personal level, man's purpose is to be the unique thing every man is by birth, a uniqueness which is inexhaustible, although in most individuals it is extinguished almost at the outset.

Every man is entitled to be continuously alive and in transition, changing if not for the literal better at least for the usages of recognizing the change itself. . .

Man is an accident, but the element of the deliberate in his accidental reality is now sufficient to permit him to put up with or to seek to correct the wrongs of the accidental that is in him, and to cherish, accept, recognize, employ extend, enlarge, improve, and thrive upon the accidental rights which were also born into him, the principal one of which is to continue, after which the rights are inexhaustibly varied. But he must continue. He must be there, in his accidental abiding place, himself, and he must respect his right to be there as painlessly as may be.

Here Comes there Goes You know Who

Merely to survive is to keep hope, greatness . . . and grace alive.

1952 The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills

The greatest happiness you can have is knowing that you do not necessarily require happiness.

My Heart's in the Highlands 1939

In the time of your life live—so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding-place and let it be free and unashamed. Place in matter and in flesh the least of the values, for these are the things that hold death and must pass away. Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption. Encourage virtue in whatever heart it may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow by the shame and terror of the world. Ignore the obvious, for it is unworthy of the clear eye and the kindly heart. Be the inferior to no man, nor of any man be the superior. Remember that every man is a variation of yourself. No man's guilt is not yours, nor is any man's innocence a thing apart. Despise evil and ungodliness, but not men of ungodliness or evil. These, understand. Have no shame in being kindly and gentle, but if the time comes in the time of your life to kill, kill and have no regret. In the time of your life, live—so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it.

Preface to William Saroyan's **The Time of Your Life,**

1939 Pulitzer Prize Winner

Of course, the human race is Armenian. How could it be anything else.?”

Here Comes there Goes You know Who

It is simply in the nature of the Armenian to study, to learn, to question, to speculate, to discover, to invent, to revise, to restore, to preserve, to make, and to give.

First Visit to Armenia 1935

I began to visit Armenia as soon as I had earned the necessary money.

First Visit to Armenia 1935

I love Armenian people—all of them. I love them because they are a part of the enormous human race, which of course I find simultaneously beautiful and vulnerable.

First Visit to Armenia 1935

The whole world and every human being in it is everybody’s business.

My Heart’s in the Highlands 1939

On that note, I’ll end where we began:

A writer wants what he has to say to be heard again and again. He wants it to be heard after he is dead.

1952 The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills
