

Follow and the Apprenticeship of William Saroyan

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Literary precociousness does not reveal itself with ease. The mechanics of playing the piano or drawing skillful pictures seem easier to master than written work. But, in studying his earliest efforts, it can be said that William Saroyan deserves to be considered some sort of literary child prodigy. Though he says he mastered the reading and writing later than his schoolmates, he also tells us that by age nine he had fallen in love with books and shortly after thought he, too, could write things similar to what he was reading. In later autobiographical accounts, he recounts often the electrifying effect de Maupassant's story "The Bell" had on him at age twelve or thirteen. Saroyan also mentions how at thirteen, with his first earnings as a telegram delivery boy, he bought a typewriter, so angering his mother that he claimed the purchase was intended to help him learn stenography and typing and get a job.

The youngest of four children in a poor, fatherless immigrant family, he knew what he wanted to do in life before all those around him: he had a goal. Part of the preparation was establishing a clear identity independent from his family; another part was the accumulation of experience. These are common aspects of many artists' careers. In *Follow*, Saroyan tells the story of this early struggle to separate himself from family and environment in order to create. Yet the reader should not be fooled. While the young writer of the story left home in his teens, the real Saroyan spent less than six months away from kith and kin, until his lightning success in 1934.

In various memoirs or autobiographical writings passing as fiction, Saroyan remarked often on how he wanted to get away from home and family in Fresno. His first timid step took place in July 1926, when he was almost 18 years old. This brief trek, mentioned in *Places Where I've Done Time* (p. 158), was from the family's El Monte Street house to a shed in Fresno, all for himself. He claimed to have lasted one night before returning to the family, but a few days later he set out for Los Angeles and took a room in a building behind the new Public Library there. After working three days at Bullock's, he got sick and a few days later, penniless and desperate, Saroyan joined the National Guard, serving for two weeks in Monterey for a dollar a day. He was returned to Los Angeles, where he met his uncle Mihran and returned with him to Fresno for a few days before heading north, first to Sonora by train for a job with the United States Forest Service. The following day, he fled to San Francisco by bus.

In the Bay Area he worked at various jobs, most notably with the Postal Telegraph Company at two different locations, no doubt because of his experience in the company's Fresno office. His brother Henry and the family had moved up to San Francisco in that same year. Saroyan remained there for two years until 16 August 1928, when he was almost 20 years of age. After getting permission from his mother in writing, in order to secure a loan from his Uncle Mihran, he finally set out to New York by bus via Salt Lake City, Chicago, and Cleveland, arriving in the early hours of Sunday, August 26, five days

before his 20th birthday. His ambition was to make it as a writer in New York after a sterile seven-year apprenticeship in California; he had published a story in Detroit's *Boulevardier* magazine during the previous April, and another in San Francisco's *Overland Monthly* the following August, but received no pay for it. Forlorn, sick again, confused, and disappointed, he returned by train to San Francisco, arriving in the first days of January 1929.

Follow, the novella Saroyan wrote subsequent to his return, chronicles these years of escape from home and adolescence. Through this work, only slightly modifying or dissimulating a thinly-veiled autobiographical series of journeys, Saroyan describes his continuing quest for self-discovery and the struggle to become a published author. The main character is named Aram Diranian. One is tempted to say that this Aram is the prototype for the Aram Garoghanian of stories that are written sometime later in the 1930s, eventually collected in *My Name Is Aram* (1940), but the difference is flagrant between the happy-go-lucky Aram of the stories, and the troubled coming-of-age Aram of *Follow*. The 105 typed pages, a bit more than 25,000 words, is a fifth longer than his short 1951 novel, *Tracy's Tiger*. The heading on page one is simply "Follow. A Story by William Saroyan" with a header: "348 Carl St., San Francisco, California." The typescript is not divided into sections or separated by ellipses into parts. For publishing purposes, the serialization by the *Fresno Bee* in May and June of 2008 was rendered into thirteen segments. But the story itself seems to be divided into two fairly equal parts of nearly fifty pages, ending with a six page coda, which serves as the finale. The serial publication was accompanied by a steady flow of articles related to Saroyan, the Armenians of Fresno, and *Follow* itself; some of that material is alluded to, included or repeated in other ways in this introduction. Those seriously interested in early Saroyan would do well to seek it out.

Part I of *Follow* recounts Aram's decision to leave home just before turning sixteen in 1924; William Saroyan himself was born in 1908. In reality, the writer left home in 1926 about a month before turning eighteen. Most of this opening concerns Aram's internal struggle with the idea of leaving home, and the distress it causes his family: a widowed mother and older sister, making no mention of Saroyan's real-life older brother and second sister, Zabel. In *Follow*, neither mother (Takoohi) nor sister (Cosette) is given a name, but Aram's dead father is called Haig. However, the mother is given a maiden name, Krikorian, but not her brother, Aram's lawyer uncle. (This character was synonymous with his "Uncle Aram" Saroyan, an aggressive Fresno attorney with whom William was often at odds during his youth.) Curiously, the word Fresno does not occur a single time in the whole work, though concrete references are made to the city's historical sites. Among them are Guggenheim's packing plant, where Aram's mother worked, and where Saroyan's mother Takoohi (born Saroyan, not Krikorian) did, as well; and Roeding Park, a longtime local landmark. Haig Diranian died at age 38 of pneumonia in the novel, while Saroyan's father, Armenak, died in 1911 of a ruptured appendix at age 36.

Most of the narrative is devoted to the uncertainty Aram has about leaving the family. Only in the very last pages of this first part do we read about the final departure for

Sonora and the following day to San Francisco. On its final page, we learn that Aram loves San Francisco and that he gets a job selling produce at the Crystal Palace Market, where Saroyan himself had worked from his earlier years until as late as 1934. The section ends upbeat and with a sense of liberation: "He had begun his pilgrimage.He was becoming a man, a writer."

Abruptly, without preparation, the next page, the opening of what I call Part II, begins: "It was inevitable that he should go to New York: his father had lived there." But here, as *Follow* continues, the narrator is almost twenty years old; three years had passed. Were these two parts once separate, unrelated stories brought together to create a longer work? Whatever the answer, why didn't Saroyan include the early San Francisco years in this novel? A plausible explanation is that Saroyan intended to write a novel about his New York experience, but found it too short, and decided to add to it the earlier episodes of his flight toward the creative life. Yet this does not explain why the San Francisco years are omitted. Did he get tired of working on the novel, thus failing to finish it? But this supposition does not work, either, since he considered the work complete. The manuscript was submitted at least once for publication (about which, see below).

Follow: Literary Archaeology

When was the 105-page typescript of *Follow* written? The version available to the *Fresno Bee* has no date on it, just the Carl Street address in San Francisco. There are several items in the William Saroyan Papers at Stanford related to the novel, including fourteen pages from Part II separated out and called "Alone" (pp. 65-78 of typescript). This is the single part of the novel heavily edited by Saroyan, not only dropping about 70 lines (20 percent of the text), but with the main character's name given as "Homer Abbott," and not Aram (in another one-page *Follow* draft, the name is "Samuel Lucian"). Also changed is the ending of the episode: Mr. Fillock offers Homer a job, instead of five dollars, as in *Follow*. The Stanford finding guide says under Folder 26 of Box 1, "Follow - A Novella - Early 1930." This guide is apparently based on an inventory of items that came out of Saroyan's San Francisco house following the death of his sister, Cosette. An earlier guide, prepared by the Bancroft Library during the decade and a half the Saroyan Papers were kept on the University of California, Berkeley campus, and before their transfer by the William Saroyan Foundation to Stanford, does not list *Follow* at all.

Were the Saroyans settled at 348 Carl Street by that date? When Saroyan returned to his family in early January 1929, they were living at 2378 Sutter Street, but shortly after they moved across the street, to 1707A Divisadero (*Places*, p. 157). By July of 1929, according to Saroyan, the family was already at Carl Street. The earliest concrete mention I have found of the address is October 8, 1929, typed at the end of a very depressing ten-page story entitled "Unfortunate Accident at the Fox Theatre," in the Saroyan Papers.

Also in the finding guide, besides *Follow*, there are a number of other longer writings from the year just before or just after *Follow* was consolidated, perhaps novellas or starts of longer novels about which virtually nothing has been written. They include

“Garibaldi's Adventure,” by Carlo Sahara; “American Glory” (early 1930s); “Home Is Hayastan” (early 1930s); “Never, Never” (early 1930s); “Lost Eternities” (1933); and “Trapeze Over the Universe,” a book-length manuscript (October 1933). There is little trace of a proposed work, “Subway,” perhaps never written as a novel, but only the published theatrical work “Subway Circus” of 1940. Saroyan himself, in the year before his death, commented on these works in a long memoir known for a time as *Adios Muchachos*, but published under the title *Where the Bones Go* (extracts) and, more recently, excerpted in the anthology *He Flies Through the Air With the Greatest of Ease*. There, Saroyan says (pp. 568-9):

... [O]nce I start a work I have got to proceed with it to the end, because during the long years of my apprenticeship I abandoned one work after another, and then knew that such a procedure, in the interest of excellence of course, was foolish: I learned that I must not demand too much of myself to begin with, or too much of my writing, next, and finally, too much of heaven, so to put it: for if heaven or God or fate or luck doesn't do the writing, I can't imagine how we can believe that I do, or any writer does...

Any commentary on or an explication of Saroyan's *Follow* ought to discuss at least these subjects: 1) the construction of the work and its literary style, 2) its relationship to Saroyan's later publications, and 3) an examination of the autobiographical details presented in it. Much of the latter two has been covered by Guy Keeler, Don Mayhew, and Doug Hoagland in articles supplementing the *Bee*'s serialization.

William Saroyan's literary career began with the publication of the story “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze,” in early 1934. He reiterated the history of its writing and success over and again in both published memoirs, for instance, in *After Thirty Years: The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, and in his carefully kept journal-diaries. From February 25 to March 2, 1974, while living in Fresno, Saroyan dwelt at length about the year 1934 and his rehearsal of the feat of writing a story a day in January of that year for *Story Magazine*, ultimately collected and published by Random House in October under the title of the famous lead story. The unpublished journal's first page is entitled “After Forty Years, The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze” but afterward, simply “Forty Diary.” Ten years before, he had in fact replicated the feat in San Francisco, producing *After Thirty Years: The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*. Now, a decade later, daily entries start in Fresno, continue through his trip to San Francisco, then by train to New York, and on to his Paris apartment on rue Taitbout; Saroyan ended the 75 single-spaced typed pages of “Forty Diary” on April 30, 1974. Near its beginning, Saroyan speaks about repeating the 1934 writing phenomenon once again and wonders if at age 65 he can pull it off. In the early pages of this work, we read of his very strong sentiment, already in late 1933, that he was going to break through into literary fame imminently. Though forty years have passed, his suggestion—really, conviction—that his apprenticeship as an aspiring writer had come to an end in 1933 is quite compelling:

I passed 348 Carl Street, by now almost falling to pieces, . . . the blinds were drawn on the front room which was my room 41 years ago when I was just concluding my apprenticeship and was writing the one month novel *Trapeze Over the Universe* which carried me into the realm of my own language, my own literary and life style and sent me pell-mell into the middle of the American literary scene, so to put it. (San Francisco, March 14, 1974, punctuation as in the original.)

But he had already said it in similar words ten years earlier:

During all of the days of October 1933, however, I *had* written something called "Trapeze over the Universe," which was not a novel but which I permitted myself to think of as a book. The writing was wild and free and what used to be called experimental, but some of it was steady and true and real, no matter what it might be called. In doing that work, in getting that book written during the month of October, I felt that I had concluded my apprenticeship. (*After Thirty Years*, p. 53.)

The apprenticeship had begun years before, when Saroyan bought a typewriter and asked to be transferred to Fresno's Technical High School to learn touch-typing. Five years later, in 1926, he set out for San Francisco; two years later, his first short stories were published. Later in the same year he set out for New York, certain that it was where he would break through as a writer. But he came back after four and a half months, in January 1929, lonely and disillusioned. As we learn at the end of *Follow*, his determination was still intact; he continued to write and submit stories and even longer works, *Follow* itself being an example.

A careful examination of the various documents in the Saroyan Papers, listed under the heading "Follow," yields some information about when that work was composed, and if it was a unitary work from the beginning. Part II, as I call it, could only have been written after Saroyan's return to San Francisco from New York in January 1929. Part I, or writing that led to it, could date from as early as 1926, when much of the journey takes place. Saroyan tells us in the same "Forty Diary" of 1974, in a Fresno entry of February 26, that, he had submitted *Follow* for possible publication in 1928 or 1929 in *The American Caravan*, a literary annual, but received the manuscript back some months later. (This is contrary to what his son Aram believed, namely that it had never been submitted, as reported by Guy Keeler in one of the *Bee* articles connected to *Follow*.) He called it "a kind of long short story, almost a novelette," but when editing part of that 1974 journal at an uncertain later date, he calls it simply "a kind of novelette." The section deserves quoting *in extenso* because of its fuller reference to his "Trapeze" novel, and that period of the author's struggle to become a writer.

In 1933 I had had nothing but rejection slips (that famous term among starting writers) from the editors and editorial assistants of every magazine I had [ever] sent stuff to, excepting several which paid nothing, like The Overland Monthly in San Francisco, or paid \$10 for a story, like The Boulevardier of Detroit. [¶] And I had had rejections from the anthology editors as might be involved in such annual

collections as The American Caravan---three rather well-known names were in charge, but I remember the name of only one of them: Alfred Kreymborg, a kind of poet who as a man of 84 [1883–1966] or so sat beside me at a dinner in New York a year or two before he died. He hadn't the slightest awareness that I had had great hopes in having something of mine in The American Caravan in 1928 and in 1929, or whenever the hell it was that that big book flourished. [¶] The stuff I [had] sent in was never acknowledged by mail, and when it was sent back there wasn't even a scribbled word Just the stupid little slip.... [¶] At that dinner I made absolutely no reference to The American Caravan.... [¶] And the editor himself had apparently forgotten that publication, which came out twice, I believe, and didn't even suspect that I might have had enormous expectations in connection with it --- sending in stories and not hearing from anybody but hoping every day to have word and then three or four months later getting the damned manuscript back---one of the (stories) called *Follow*, a kind of ~~long short story~~, almost a novelette, had coffee stains on it, but who had read it and had dripped coffee on it I could not guess.... so, even though I knew my writing was getting near its truth and emancipation, especially in October 1933 when I finished a grand far-out novel called *Trapeze Over the Universe*, I knew I was no where near anything like an acceptance of my writing by the members and owners and operators of the American literary world. And that was something I had to be very much concerned about, because it meant my life. (Fresno, February 26, 1974, strikeout and paragraph marks holographically written by Saroyan on September 4, 1974.)

This is precious information toward the dating of the work. *The American Caravan*, a yearbook of American literature, had as its editors Van Wyck Brooks, Alfred Kreymborg, Lewis Mumford, and Paul Rosenfeld. It apparently appeared four times: in 1927, 1928, 1929, and 1931. The writing of the final section of *Follow* could not have been completed before Saroyan's return to California, allowing a period from sometime in early 1929 to early 1931 for submission of the (consolidated?) novel to *The American Caravan*. Saroyan had mentioned Kreymborg already in early reflections of 1930, perhaps when he submitted *Follow* to the latter's literary annual. An untitled, unpublished two-page sketch begins, "Today I am exactly twenty-two years of age," thus, August 31, 1930. "When I was in New York several years ago I met a young Jewess... [She exclaimed] 'Look! There's Alfred Kreymborg.' I had never before heard the name. She was shocked and mentioned some authors: cummings, Pound, Hemingway," and Saroyan admitted only to having read Hemingway. "The fact of the matter is that I quit reading at sixteen." A statement that Saroyan repeats more than once, but with ages varying up to his first success, namely when he was 25. The evidence—Carl Street address, Kreymborg, the 1974 journal—would suggest that 1930 was the date of the novel as we have it. But earlier evidence seems to refute this idea, and raises questions about the whole process of memory, always so dear to Saroyan.

In the long quotation above, William Saroyan speaks of the coffee stains on the returned manuscript, suggesting that he had perhaps seen it again in 1974. But the journal entry is from Fresno, ten days before he sets out to San Francisco to stay with sister Cosette in the

15th Street house where the manuscript was found. That could suggest that *Follow* was then with Saroyan's papers in Fresno and only later made its way to San Francisco, or that he brought it with him in 1974. Furthermore, Saroyan is uncertain just when he wrote and submitted the novel to *The American Caravan*: "... in 1928 and in 1929, or whenever the hell it was...." How could he have forgotten that he had so emphatically spoken about *Follow* and the date of composition in *After Thirty Years*, written in San Francisco?

[H]owever, I wrote one good piece... sent it out, and it came back, sometimes in a hurry, sometimes after a couple of months, and once or twice even after the editors had lost the manuscript and found it again: these were the editors of an annual collection of new writing called the American Caravan: Lewis Mumford, Alfred Kreymborg, Paul Rosenfeld, and Wan Wyck Brooks. The rather long story I had sent them early in 1929 was called "Follow," and if it did nothing else, it revealed a writer, but still it was sent back, after long months during which I had imagined that it had been accepted, a very brief typed note clipped to it, not from any of the three editors, but from a secretary. (*After Thirty Years*, pp. 66-7: February 8, 1964.)

A week later, on February 14, 1964, Saroyan returns to *Follow*:

As I write about the writing I did in 1934, I am not looking at the book in which the stories came out. That was then and this is now. I don't need to read the 1934 stories, I only need to write the 1964 ones, which I am doing... The real then is the real now.... "Follow" was the name of the story I sent to the editors of the American Caravan in January of 1929, after my first visit to New York. The story was about the *following* [emphasis added, DK] of a line, of being a son following a father, and so on. There is a lot of follow in my work and life, and surely in anybody's. Before a man is twenty-five, ... before he has traveled along the lines of his life, not known what they are or where they go, most of everything still unknown, undecided, not even once fixed, the going is both more dramatic and more difficult, more vulnerable, more likely to have been useless.... (*After Thirty Years*, p. 82.)

We have little choice but to accept Saroyan's own earlier words that, indeed, the work was written immediately after his return to San Francisco. He had a lifelong habit, rarely broken, of writing about experiences immediately after they were lived. But the problem of the date of the manuscript, now in the Papers, and the basis for this edition remains unresolved. The manuscript has the Carl Street address typed on it, but upon returning from New York in January 1929, the family was at Sutter Street and then moved to Divisadero. Of course this does not rule out an earlier date than July for the move to Carl Street, but the possibility that he reworked the manuscript after it was rejected must not be discounted, thus allowing a date in the second half of 1929 for the version published herein.

The Title

The title “Follow” is both strange and enigmatic. Verbs as titles are unusual, and generally have the sense of a command. The word “follow” also has the sense of succession, one thing coming after another, and thus success. Saroyan uses “follow” only once in the text:

As he walked home in the warm, soft evening he felt displeased with himself because of his immaturity. He had accomplished nothing in either life or letters, and he was resolved now to go ahead in one or the other. It would be wisest, he felt, to go ahead in life now rather than in letters. After a little more living, a little more movement, expansion, adventure, romance, love, and so on, letters would be easy. Writing would *follow* as a matter of course. He knew it would be hard on him, but he was ready to pay the price. There would be many hardships, of course, but he would never be bored. His leaving home would be a step towards maturity, he would be more of a man after he had been to other cities, lived in other circles, and loved. Everyone who ever amounted to anything left home.
(Follow typescript, p. 24; emphasis added)

The paragraph comes after a long reflection by Aram Diranian on his youthful, naïve belief that by buying a typewriter and learning to touch-type nearly as fast as he thought, he could easily turn out a novel. But that did not work, even though at first he thought the subjects he chose might be wrong.

The notion of “follow” is reinforced in unpublished notes and stories from this period. An eight-page story entitled “Boy into Man,” uses the word “follow” eighteen times, as a leitmotiv. Daniel, the story’s protagonist, thinks while walking to town: “Elf-soul *follow*. Save for the little accident there would be no world. *Follow...*” (p.2). “It was dawn now. A new day. *Follow*. ...[H]e knew plenty, too. *Follow*. Who?... town of the Ash Tree” “I’m thirteen. That was no lie.” ... “*Follow*, son, *follow*. Enter now. The curtain is raised, the audience is waiting. *Follow*, little mouse.” (p.3) “...That was life. Going on errands to drug stores for actresses who stayed at hotels. That was *following*.” (p. 5) “*Follow*, little man, *follow*.” ... “The dark life, the shaded path, the path of pleasure. *Follow*, infant, *follow*.” [Women ask his name.] “*Follow*, son, *follow*.” ... [again] “*Follow* now. *Follow*.”.... “‘No,’ she laughed. ‘I’m here for the summer only.’ ... Ah, the summer only. The season of life, growth, *following*. She was a woman, all right.” (p.7) ...”O earthling, timid hare-soul, *follow*. O brother unborn, bosom brother unknown, come along. Cerebral-babe, ghost son, ego *follow*.” ... “Here, take this dollar.” ”O earthling *follow*. Where? O Where?” (p. 8)

The passages make clear that for Saroyan, “follow” meant to experience, to taste life, to love, eventually to travel, and thus to gain experience out of which to write. Aram Diranian’s moving from his hometown to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, like Saroyan’s parallel travels, provided the raw material to allow him the needed dimension in order for the instrument of composition, the typewriter, to carry out the writing program. He confirmed this sense three decades later in his 1964 memoir, cited previously.

At the end of the novel, Saroyan wants the reader to understand that though he did not break through in New York, returning home humiliated, he knew he had absorbed through “following” what was needed to renew his work as a writer, but now, with a renewed interest, and the experience to fashion his proper literature.

Well, it was all over now. He had his chance. He had reached for the grapes, but he had found them green and sour. He couldn’t make the grade. He was going back now. Not a success, but a failure. He’d reach home with about two dollars in his pocket, and he’d look sick as a dog. Well, they’d laugh at him. The boy who went to the big city and didn’t make good. Ha, ha, ha.

(...)

They’d laugh at him, all right. They’d be sure to laugh at him. All the world would laugh.

...

The old fire surged in his sick body. The blood of his mother came to the rescue of that in him which was his father’s.

“But I’ll show them!” The train sped through... wide open areas. “I’ll show them. I’m not through yet. No, not by a long shot. They can’t get the best of me. I’ve still got my typewriter. They got the best of my father, but I’ll show them. I’ll go on writing. I’ll get there some day. I’ll see the top.”

(...)

In the heat of the summer-time ... when the fruit of the orchard is soft with ripeness, the vine heavy with bunches of fat, round grapes, a mystic uneasiness troubles the heart; there is an acute longing for the sublime, a desire to achieve ... to accomplish, to reach heights, to live fully.

The train sped on and on.

“I’ll show them!” he wept in his mind. “I’ll show the dirty bastards; trying to kill me with the cold,... but I’m still alive. ... There’s still time. I’ll get even on them.”

It is precisely this idea of “follow” meaning “living life” that the famous prologue of *The Time of Your Life*, Saroyan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, written at the end of the same decade, celebrates: “In the time of your life, live ...” The notion of living, being alive and aware of it, was a subtext for Saroyan from the start of his writing to its end. *Follow* seems to be the earliest, or at least the most articulate, manifestation of it, during these apprenticeship years.

The Structure

The construction of this short novel is very loose. Compared to the slightly shorter *Tracy's Tiger* of 20 years later, it appears to have no other plot than the telling of the sojourn of its main character from his home in California's Central Valley to New York and back. It is the log of a journey, but also a diary of reflection on becoming an adult and writer. Saroyan might have had James Joyce's early works in mind, *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, both of which were recommended to him by Yvor Winters, the Stanford professor and literary figure whose salon Saroyan, upon his return from New York, occasionally frequented. According to Saroyan's remarks in *Sons Come and Go, Mothers Hang in Forever* (p. 74), he met Winters when he was 22, or between September 1930 and August 1931. This would support a date of composition (or revision) of the novel in the fall or winter of 1930-1., but not one of early 1929.

Curiously, Saroyan devotes just a single page to the two years he was in San Francisco (1926-1928), in which he declares his joy and excitement, and a first job. "He was happy, independent, on his way.... He had begun his pilgrimage. He forgot his past life,...there had never been another life. He forgot everything but the present. He was becoming a man, a writer." (Typescript, p. 47.) The Fresno years, devoted entirely to the atmosphere within the family of Aram Diranian and his desire to escape, are the substance of Part I, the years at home (1924-1926), while Part II jumps to the four and a half month moment in New York (late August 1928 to early January 1929). But the work is called a short novel or novella by Saroyan, not an autobiographical memoir. Yet, it is most certainly both, anticipating a manner of writing that remains dear to him until the last twenty years of his life, when he devotes himself, at least in longer works, exclusively to autobiographical reminiscence. Those early San Francisco years are less frequently fictionalized, unlike the New York months (the basis for the last half of *Follow*), and all of *Tracy's Tiger*. Saroyan's first published works of novel length, the collection of loosely related stories (*My Name Is Aram*, 1940) and his first novel-film script of 1942-3 (*The Human Comedy*), reverted to his early years growing up in Fresno, and have nothing at all to say about San Francisco. The most emblematic account of San Francisco is "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze." There is much of *Follow* in that short work, which Saroyan has said more than once was in part mined from the earlier, unpublished "Trapeze Over the Universe." Yet, much of the action and reflection in "The Daring Young Man" comes directly out of the experiences that Aram is made to suffer during the New York section of *Follow*: seeking work from dour older secretaries, visiting and drinking water at the library, describing food that he has little of in great detail. Still, San Francisco supplied the environment for Saroyan's most famous play, *The Time of Your Life*, and is talked about often by the writer in such memoirs as *Places Where I've Done Time* and *Sons Come and Go*.

In his autobiographical works, Saroyan always speaks with joy and happiness about the early San Francisco years (1926-28), where he worked at several jobs. Even when he returned from New York, he seemed to like the city despite the pressure from his family to find work, something he was loath to do because Saroyan had firmly decided that his labor would be writing, and only writing. We find this same love-hate dichotomy

surrounding New York, so meanly described in *Follow*, with a desperate Aram Diranian, always dejected, destitute, and often sick; and his glowing letters home to his Uncle Mihran, his mother, sister Cosette, brother Henry, and his cousin John Saroyan (son of his father's sister, Vartouhi), which are appended to this volume. He is emphatic that upon arriving in New York at two in the morning on Sunday August 26, 1928, five days before his twentieth birthday, he was able to get a job with Postal Telegraph in lower Manhattan the next day. Such opposite feelings are characteristic of much of Saroyan's writing and thinking. He was always quick to say that birth is the prelude to death, that man's perpetuate sorrow requires and must be accompanied by laughter. Even the two opening pages of *Follow* have contrasting sentiments: "[H]e sought to escape from the tawdriness of his life and environment, which was becoming more and more unbearable each day" (Typescript, p. 1); "Something wonderful was always on the verge of happening; something that would give his life purpose and at the same time elegance and grace" (p. 2).

None of the other people with whom Diranian interacts are found in both parts of the story, unless we count the internal thoughts of Aram turned toward home, mother and sister near the end of the New York episode. Characters are described, sometimes allowed to talk, and then forgotten as the hero moves on to his next adventure, especially in Part II. In Part I, the mother and the sister have a rather consistent role during the first forty pages.

Within this linear development, Saroyan builds up tension and interest by combining Aram's thoughts, a stream of consciousness at times, with third person narration and bursts of dialogue. From the beginning of his writing career, critics recognized his ability to render dialogue convincingly and naturally. In *Follow*, it often seems like the cement that brings together the rather episodic structure of the work. Stream of consciousness musings, mixed with third person portraits of those men and women met along the way, plus the often-lyric descriptions of the environment, create the interest the reader needs to move along.

The account is filled with very sumptuous accounts of the countryside and poetic reflections on life and destiny, another hallmark of Saroyan's prose. Whether the two parts were originally separate literary exercises is not absolutely clear. Surely Saroyan was aware that they needed to be tied together by more than just having a single figure as the subject of both. He uses various literary conceits to bind them together, such as the bucolic opening (p.1) repeated word for word, except for the omitted phrase "there is swift growth even in men, at the end":

In the heat of the summer-time in agricultural parts of the country, when the fruit of the orchard is soft with ripeness, the vine heavy with bunches of fat, round grapes, there is swift growth even in men. A mystic uneasiness troubles the heart; there is an acute longing for the sublime, a desire to achieve immensity of spirit; to do, to accomplish, to reach heights, to live fully.

Preparation and Writing Technique

More than a quarter of century ago, I spoke about Saroyan's working methods ("Saroyan's Writing Techniques," *William Saroyan Festival Program*, 1981, pp. 12-13). By the time of *Follow*, he had some nine years to develop what was later to be called instant writing, instigated by his mastery of stenographic typing at age thirteen. Years before 1930, he learned that sitting at the typewriter and waiting for inspiration often led to nothing getting done. He was interested in time and swiftness, thus he forced himself to write quickly when he sat before the infernal machine, always seemingly capable of at least thirty, usually flawless, words a minute for a sustained period.

The thousands of pages of manuscripts and letters Saroyan typed before *Follow* slowly perfected his method of composing as quickly as he could type. It is true that among the pre-1934 manuscripts kept in the Saroyan Papers at Stanford, when there is editing, it tends to be heavier than was the case later in his life. Also, many of these early works have drafts or versions, virtually unknown in Saroyan's later works. But slowly and surely, the drafts became fewer, and the editing, too, though in earlier memoirs he does talk about rereading and editing texts after they were composed. By the time of his first major publishing success, he toiled daily to perfect the instantaneous nature of his prose. His aim was to type as rapidly as he could think. Much of every day and night was spent thinking about what he might write, collecting the material mentally except for random scribbled notes, especially titles and names of characters, which he frequently used as the starting point for stories and plays, both long and short. A very early reference to this accumulation by rumination is in a journal entry of December 30, 1932, entitled "PROGRAM for the year 1933"; it is also one of the first times he puts the times of starting and ending the typing of the pages. "January major work one novel. To be composed at the rate of one chapter per day, eight or more pages to the chapter....Writing to begin daily after walk of at least two miles."

This automatic writing, probably unrelated to André Breton's surrealist automatism started in 1919, was something practiced later by Beat writers. But Saroyan's concern was not so much theoretical or subconscious as it was related to speed, something he was interested in from his youngest years. He mastered his technique and most of his voluminous writing was rendered in this way: no drafts or outlines, just a direct outpouring of typed words. The earliest that Saroyan speaks of his method, at least to my knowledge, other than in *Follow*, is in one of his first surviving journal entries (March 15, 1931):

With me writing is a system of conserving nervous energy over a sustained period of time, sometimes two days, sometimes a week, sometimes two, in which I gather impressions, go here and there, see people, talk to a few, and then when the energy has sufficiently intensified these impressions and incidents, trivial as they may be, and give them an artful coherence, an orderliness necessary for prose, I sit at my typewriter and begin to write, releasing the energy in one prolonged period. After that I am refreshed. Creative art, I feel, is considerably similar to physical procreation...

After Saroyan started publishing regularly, it is difficult to find drafts of his major or minor works. Though it is true that he would at times change endings or small, but important, details of works like *The Time of Your Life*, or *The Human Comedy*, for subsequent printed editions.

This method can best be compared to that of two other artistic media: jazz and oriental scroll painting. The jazz musician goes through years of apprenticeship, whether schooled or self-taught, to get things just right; in a sense, to swing. Once that understanding of keys, modulations, chords, and construction is mastered, he/she simply plays. In the same way, a Chinese scroll painter or a Japanese calligrapher spends decades perfecting the execution of his art so that, when finally before a blank scroll, he accomplishes his work in one steady stream—no interruptions and no retouching. Saroyan himself was a practiced artist, a watercolorist, who used precisely this technique: “I have been drawing all of my life. My drawings seek a kind of perfection, a kind of sudden unmistakable flawlessness, a word in a language, a whole language itself. Most of the drawings are made so swiftly as to be, to have been, instantaneous.” (“My Paintings,” *Evergreen Review*, 2/8, Spring 1959, p. 149). Elsewhere he has said that his watercolors or drawings came “to pass over a period of three seconds, ten, twenty, or thirty, but hardly ever more than that.” Clearly for Saroyan there was such an integral relationship between living and creating that separation of these activities in his case was near-impossible. Hundreds of unpublished works written during the last two decades of his life, and thousands of paintings and drawings, preserved in the Saroyan Papers and by the William Saroyan Foundation, survive in single copies, untouched by corrections or additions, waiting for editors to decide how to treat them. His paintings are as he realized them, though he does say once that the next day he added something to a picture.

Saroyan, also in this apprentice period, started to obsessively record the exact place where he was working, and the date. The earliest incidence of this habit that I know of was just around the time of *Follow* (1930), after which the beginning day and, at times, the terminal day was indicated. Some years later he also started adding the starting and ending time of every typed page, always expressed in five-minute segments, as I have explained in the Festival Program. In the 1960s and 70s, probably in Paris, he almost invariably constructed his work by producing a page or chapter or act a day (a habit already evident in 1933, and bragged about in the 1939 writing of *The Time of Your Life* in six days). But by then, these were special 800-word, single-spaced pages on extra long typing paper. The scores of one-act plays from this period were all written in exactly seven days (seven pages); longer ones could go on for 21 pages. It was normal practice for him to be working on more than one work at a time, sometimes three, each a page a day, usually in the morning for 20- to 30-minute sessions, with five- or ten-minute breaks in-between. One would imagine this would create a choppy or certainly an episodic style, but as I have pointed out in the introduction to *William Saroyan. An Armenian Trilogy* (1986), it is very hard, almost impossible to figure out from the printed text where one page ends and the next begins. The editors of Saroyan's posthumous work *Births* (1983) had the good idea to leave the dates and starting and finishing times for each page as

headers. *Follow* makes it clear that Saroyan (here, Aram) fell on this method almost as soon as he mastered typing:

Although he had had his typewriter for over three months he had not written anything worth while, and he was quite ashamed of himself. It was extremely difficult for him to finish a piece of writing. His desk was cluttered with hundreds of stories, poems, and essays he had abandoned after one or two paragraphs. He had even commenced a novel....

He imagined he would be able to write a novel in no longer than two months. He based his estimation on the rate of his speed at typing. In tests he had averaged over forty words per minute for fifteen minutes. At the rate of only thirty words per minute he could write one thousand eight hundred words in an hour. If he wrote only one hour each evening in thirty days he would have written fifty four thousand words. In forty five days ninety thousand, which he had read was the average length of modern novels." (Typescript, p. 22).

Above I have already shown, while discussing the possible meaning of *Follow*, that Saroyan understood this method of lightning execution was of little value if there was not enough internal material that the writer experienced or owned to talk about. Once he acquired the living to write like lightning, presented to the reader so explicitly in this novel, nothing could stop him.

Themes

Already, in this early novel, William Saroyan mixes fiction with autobiography. It is very difficult to separate the writer from his characters in any of his novels. Perhaps in *Tracy's Tiger*, even though the incidents and the locus of the action are the same as those of *Follow*, Lower Manhattan and the fate of a young man who returns many years later and captures a mood, a feeling of those early years. Tracy is not Saroyan, but a figure of Saroyan's imagination, much more than Wesley Jackson in the novel of the same name who is the misfit soldier, like Saroyan, in a war he was against. The same can be said of so many of his short stories, not just those of *My Name Is Aram*. He was more successful in creating purely fictional characters in his plays, though some have remarked that many of them, in a work like *The Time of Your Life*, are in fact Saroyan's various personae.

Nevertheless, the major figures of *The Beautiful People*, *Jim Dandy*, *Hello Out There*, *The Cave Dwellers* and many other plays published during his lifetime seem to stand and live independently of Saroyan's own life. But his stories and novels are essentially drawn directly from his life, either things that he did or people that he knew. Thus, it is difficult to draw the line in *Follow* between the made-up and reality. The actual differences tend to be minor: Aram Diranian as the main character rather than himself; a father who dies two years older than Saroyan's and with a different illness; a widowed mother and sister, instead of two sisters and an older brother; down and out in New York, rather than working from the moment of his arrival. But most of the rest is Saroyan's life, sticking nearly perfectly to the years, and even the very dates, of his comings and goings.

There is little joy in the events he recounts. Rather, Aram expresses a feeling of depression, repression, and a desire to escape, followed by melancholy and sadness, with long passages about the ugliness, poverty, shabbiness of life, and the unpleasant smells and appearance of his many hotels and rooming houses. There are, too, the miserable individuals he has to interact with, from the woman in the Sonora forestry office to the dying clerk in the telegraph office in New York. The relief comes from brief moments of love or attraction felt by a maturing young man; the beautiful pastoral descriptions, especially of the California countryside; the occasional generosity of people toward the poor young man; and his own compassionate reaching out to those he sees like himself, or even worse off. But most of all, the hope found in the novel is centered on Aram's will to succeed, his unshakeable determination to overcome all obstacles toward attaining the skills necessary to become a writer and, in the process, an adult.

Another theme, perhaps more a characteristic of the work, is the book's its regular philosophizing about the meaning of life, through the reflections of its hero. Saroyan was always a serious thinker, constantly meditating about the meaning of life, a tendency that naturally accentuated with age. There is a disposition common to much of Saroyan's writing to suggest that mankind is stuck in an indifferent world, one that offers little hope of redemption. Many of his earlier works reflect a certain controlled, dignified desperation, like "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze," in which the would be writer's graceful end is nevertheless death by starvation. This is quite different than the upbeat, often hilarious frolicking and gaiety of works like *My Name Is Aram*, *The Beautiful People*, or the somewhat later *Sam, the Highest Jumper of Them All*. In this respect, his outlook is sometimes close to that of the existentialists. It is up to the individual to make what he can out of his/her life, without expecting too much from it.

Regularly spaced throughout *Follow* is the use of dreams; the words "dream," "dreamed," or "dreaming" are used sixteen times. Aram Diranian's are vividly described; they often drive the action. All his life, Saroyan was obsessed by his own dreams. He often writes about the difficulty of separating dream from reality, and suggests regularly that the world of dreams is as real or more real than life when we are supposedly awake. The subtitles of his inaugural story "The Daring Young Man" are 'Sleep' and 'Wakefullness.' He trained himself to remember carefully his dreams. He always kept a dream notebook at his bed stand and would record dreams as remembered, even in the middle of the night, half asleep, at times in a hand very difficult to read. These dream books are in the Saroyan Papers, but thus far have not been studied. I have read one entitled "Saving Everything" that was typed by Saroyan, covering 41 consecutive days in Paris starting in April and ending on May 31, 1972, with 47 pages of run-on sentences. It intertwines his daily routine with the dreams he has had each day. It is replete with figures from his past who people his dreams: Mickey Rooney, Johnny Carson, his mother and immediate family; Ross Bagdasarian, his artistic cousin, his Uncle Aram, Charlie Chaplin, and a host of others, including friends, but also anonymous shades who move in and out of the dreams.

In *Follow* family is everywhere, while Diranian is living within his own, or when he is far away. The family becomes an abiding theme, an obsession, as in most of Saroyan's later works. Here he contrasts his mother and her clan with his father's. He attaches his own destiny to that of his unfulfilled father. There are vaguely expressed Oedipal feelings toward his mother. The dominating figure of his extroverted, aggressive, ego-driven Uncle Aram from the distaff side is rendered strongly; his more contemplative Uncle Mihran, his dead father's younger brother, who appears so kindly in the letters appended to this novel, is not even mentioned.

I Am an Armenian

Closely tied to the theme of family is that of identity. In *Follow* one is surprised by the emphatic assertion of Aram Diranian's Armenian origin, especially in the second part. In more famous works of the same decade—*My Heart's in the Highlands, My Name Is Aram*—references to origins are subtle to the point of being nearly imperceptible. Aram, in the first part of *Follow*, is much younger and less secure with it. He makes it clear that one of the reasons he wants to leave Fresno is because of prejudice. “‘My people are Armenians,’ said Aram. It would be good to get away from this town. Here he would always be an Armenian, there would never be any escape from that, but in the outer world no one would care what he was, no one would dare look down upon him as an inferior” (Typescript, p. 34).

In Part II, Aram, alone and homesick, clings to his identity. In the section devoted almost entirely to his Armenianness (Typescript, pp. 78-83): he “longed more than anything else for Armenia: the sight of his own people, the sound of his own tongue, the richness of his own language” (p. 80). Three times he emphatically repeats “I am an Armenian” and even invokes the ancestral land's name in the language, “Oh, my country Hayastan! Oh, weary Father, Mother!” associating it with family. Among archival documents of this period are poems and songs Saroyan wrote in Armenian using the Latin alphabet, at times with parallel English translation. Two years later, starting in 1932, he began a lifelong relationship with the Hairenik Association in Boston, publishers of an Armenian daily, an English language weekly (starting 1933), and a monthly in both languages. This “Armenian” moment climaxed in 1935 with his first visit to Armenia, then a Soviet republic. It is expressed most intensely in the last lines of the last story, “The Armenian and the Armenian,” of his second book, *Inhale and Exhale* (1936), offering perhaps Saroyan's most famous quote on his feelings toward his origins and popularized after his death by its (distorted and sanitized) reproduction on posters, cards, and other souvenirs. “I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race.... Go ahead, destroy this race. Let us say that it is again 1915. ... See if you can stop them from mocking the big ideas of the world, you sons of bitches, a couple of Armenians talking in the world, go ahead and try to destroy them.” (p. 438)

Gradually, however, Armenians disappear from Saroyan's major works. Of the sixty to sixty-five plays, both long and very short, published during his lifetime, only the first one has any Armenian characters. His novels too, except for *Rock Wagram* (1951), speak little of Armenians, substituting Assyrian at times as in *The Laughing Matter* (1953). Yet

Saroyan kept writing about Armenia and the Armenians in his short fiction, memoirs, journals, and letters. It was only after his death that some of this “private” output was published, such as the plays in *An Armenian Trilogy* (1986) or *Tales from the Vienna Streets* (1991). In part this was so because Saroyan thought of himself as an American writer, in the mainstream tradition of literature in English. Though he always asserted his Armenian origins, he did not see himself as an ethnic writer, a label foisted on him toward the end of his life.

New York Sketches

The profuse, at times pedantic, allusions to famous writers and musicians that flow through Aram Diranian's mind, especially in the youthful early part of the book *Follow*, demonstrate just how much Saroyan thought of himself as a continuator of European and American writing. Some of the references seem to us obscure (Leacock, Hubbard, Haldeman-Julius), but a Google search illuminates each one of them, and often helps with the chronology. For instance, “Mississippi Shiver,” which is referred to as “a modern jazz composition by Zez Confrey” (Typescript, p. 29) was in fact recorded in 1924, just about the time that Saroyan suggests that Aram was preparing to escape.

This edition of *Follow* is accompanied by a selection of other works from Saroyan's apprentice years, carefully selected from thousands of pages of archival documents by William B. Secrest Jr. They cover the period immediately before, during, and just after the writing of the novel. One might add to the correspondence another letter, perhaps the most famous of the lot, since it was published by the *Bee* on June 1 of Saroyan's centennial year. It was written in New York on New Year's Day 1929 and addressed to Yep[rad] Moradian, his closest Fresno friend, but never posted. It fills in a gap in the preserved New York correspondence, which stops in late October 1928 and does not resume until Saroyan is back in San Francisco. It clearly echoes the loneliness, hardship, and failure that the writer felt at the end of his Manhattan adventure.

Among the four short pieces, the last is a later sketch trying to describe a lost work from those New York months, “The Mentality of Apes,” written on February 13, 1964 (*After Thirty Years*, p. 90). However, Saroyan's letter to his cousin Johnny from New York of September 19, 1928 (see below pp. 146-7) provides details of the story that he had apparently forgotten by 1964. Saroyan was known to save everything; he was especially attached to anything he wrote and not getting back a submitted manuscript, especially during the earlier years before he started making carbon copies (a habit he says started during the war on the advice of a lawyer: *Sons Come and Go*, p. 78). This was one of three lost manuscripts of this early period spoken of in the writer's memoirs.

“Scenario for a Talking Picture,” perhaps written around the time of the first talkies, including that of his and Aram Diranian's very much admired compatriot, Rouben Mamoulian's *Applause* of 1929, one of the pioneer sound films. Saroyan was an addict of both movies and vaudeville, evident in his style for the latter, and his short love-hate relationship with Hollywood. The treatment is essentially a love story of a timid lost soul, very much in feeling like the heroes of both *Follow* and “The Daring Young Man.” The

other two add further to the breadth of interests and the precocious writing ability of our young apprentice. A very avant-garde exercise in the use of words, “Mania Moderna” is a seemingly disjointed string of words and phrases, as pseudonymous William Whiskey declares in the first line: “A word before I start: there is no purpose to this paper....There is nothing here but words carelessly gathered together.” Yet, recurrent in this absurdist flow is the description of his decrepit New York room.

Quite different in tone, “Manhattan Street Scene” is a long flowing poem arranged as prose, except for the last four lines presented in a single stanza. The opening paragraphs are very rhythmic in a staccato series of allusions, similar to what Rouben Mamoulian was to use to open his staging of “Porgy” in 1927 and later in the opening of his film *Love Me Tonight* (1932). The heart of the story is constructed on repetition with augmentation, somewhat like songs such as “On the First Day of Christmas” or “Buy Me a Cat,” made famous by Aaron Copland’s version or, more simply, “Old MacDonald Had a Farm.” Here is the penultimate paragraph, arranged as poetry:

Lysander’s big eyes seeking and not finding.

Lysander’s big eyes seeking and not finding romance and love.

Lysander’s big eyes seeking and not finding romance and love because there is a reality.

Lysander’s big eyes seeking and not finding romance and love because there is a slimey reality that smells of death.

Lysander’s big eyes seeking and not finding romance and love because there is a slimey reality that smells of death and frightens him.

Lysander’s big eyes seeking and not finding romance and love because there is a slimey reality that smells of death and frightens him into only dreaming about love and life.

Two of these pieces, our New York Sketches, are signed William Whiskey and Carlo Sahara, among Saroyan’s most-used pen names of the period. He would soon be submitting poetry and stories to the *Hairenik* publications signed Sirak Goryan, but these are just a few of the many he used in the early years: Edward Antoyan, Simon Goryan, Rhoopen Hatchig, Aram Manoyan, Emanuel Borsch, Willo Sahara, and Haig Armen. He loved the name Aram, as evidenced by *Follow* and *My Name Is Aram* as well as the name of his own son. Perhaps Saroyan’s most famous pseudonym was Aram Garoghtanian, the latter the name of his adored maternal grandmother Lucintak, which he used actively throughout his life, and not just in the 1940 stories. Most people thought that Saroyan purposely refused to list his name and number in the Fresno telephone book, but close friends knew it was indeed there under Aram Garoghtanian, 2729 W. Griffith Way.

Many, including Aram Saroyan, consider *Follow* the best of his unpublished early works, a feeling shared by the team that is responsible for this publication. Modern literary criticism, like other scholarly disciplines, talks now about “contextualizing.” Here, we have felt that adding writings, introductions, and the correspondence all help to provide the background so important to understanding the creative process, not only behind *Follow*, but underpinning much of William Saroyan's early successes. It is also a way of whetting the appetite of readers; indeed, provoking younger scholars to penetrate the endless riches contained in the William Saroyan Papers.

END