

Taniel Varouzhan Annual Lecture 2022

Writing between Hope and Tragedy: The Life and Work of Eghia Demirjibashian

Lecturer: Prof. Theo van Lint (University of Oxford)

Welcoming remarks: Prof. Peter van Nuffelen

Expression of thanks: Dr Krikor Moskofian

Date: 7 May 2022

Time: 5 PM (local time)

Venue: Platearoom, Ghent University, Jozef Plateastraat 22, 9000, Ghent

This year saw the return of the Taniel Varouzhan Annual Lecture after a two-year hiatus imposed by the pandemic. Members of the Armenian community in Belgium and those in neighbouring countries gathered alongside scholars with an interest in Armenian history and literature to hear the second in the series of lectures dedicated to the memory of Taniel Varouzhan. This year's lecture was generously sponsored by the Antwerp-based Arslanian Foundation and the Gulbenkian Foundation, for whose support we are deeply grateful.

The opening remarks fell to Prof. Dr Peter van Nuffelen, Professor for the Cultural History of the Ancient World at Ghent University. Van Nuffelen edited the recent special edition of the *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire / Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* (Belgian Review of Philology and History) entitled *Daniel Varoujan: Un poète arménien à Gand – cent ans après* (Taniel Varouzhan: An Armenian poet in Ghent – a hundred years on), which features papers on Varouzhan, his work, his life in Ghent, and other topics on the theme of Belgian-Armenian relations. Prof. Dr Van Nuffelen warmly welcomed everyone to the lecture, whether attending in person or watching the livestream online.

Next to speak was Dr Krikor Moskofian, founder and director of the Programme of Armenian Studies. In his remarks Dr Moskofian thanked everyone involved in arranging the lecture. 2022 is the Programme of Armenian Studies's tenth anniversary, and while our enthusiasm and core values remain the same, the past ten years have seen many changes; from our London-based beginnings, putting on Western Armenian evening classes and lectures on a wide variety of subjects in Armenian studies, we have evolved into an international institution making a vital contribution to the preservation and promotion of Western Armenian identity and culture in many areas, with the Western Armenian language always at its heart. Dr Moskofian took the opportunity to formally announce the Programme of Armenian Studies' name change to the Centre for Western Armenian Studies. This new name aligns better with our activities and vision, and we look forward to another ten years of growth and fruitful work.

Prof. Theo Maarten van Lint, Calouste Gulbenkian Professor of Armenian Studies at the University of Oxford and the speaker of 2022's Taniel Varouzhan Annual Lecture, then took

the stage to begin his talk, entitled *Writing between Hope and Tragedy: The Life and Work of Eghia Demirjibashian*. Eghia Demirjibashian was a Constantinopolitan Armenian poet and writer who led an active and eccentric life. Prof. van Lint remarked that even as a child Demirjibashian had been called “foolish and liberal” by his teachers for straying from his recommended reading material. Demirjibashian would go on to write prolifically, publishing his work in journals (many of which he set up) and newspapers, and weighing in on the *Krabaykar* (“writing battle”) debate on whether Armenians should write in Classical Armenian or the spoken dialects. Prof. van Lint remarked that Demirjibashian used a number of pen names over the course of his copious career, perhaps in a similar way to the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, and encouraged any budding academics who might be listening to investigate this comparison.

As implied by the title of the lecture, however, all was not well in Demirjibashian’s life. Afflicted by personal tragedies and mental illness, he spent his later years in and out of hospital, before eventually ending his life in 1908. Despite the Church’s attitude to suicide, the fact that he was given a lavish literary funeral anyway speaks to his importance to the society he lived in. Prof. van Lint ended his lecture by reading his translation of Demirjibashian’s moving poem in praise of the Bosphorus.

After the lecture the speaker and guests retired to a nearby restaurant. Wine and conversation flowed, and the room filled with chatter in Western and Eastern Armenian, Dutch, French, Arabic and English. To finally be able to gather once more and celebrate Armenian literature in the name of Taniel Varouzhan, in the city he loved, was a joyous thing, and we look forward to welcoming everyone to Ghent again in 2023.