

Critics' Forum

Literature

The Presence of the Past in the Poetry of Peter Balakian

By Hovig Tchalian

The year 2004 saw the publication of the most recent paperback edition of Peter Balakian's poetry. The slim, attractive volume, entitled *June-Tree: New and Selected Poems, 1974-2000*, includes thirteen new works and selections from Balakian's four previous collections.

The compilation may come as a bit of a surprise to some readers. Balakian is best known for his non-poetic writings—*Black Dog of Fate: An American Son Uncovers His Armenian Past* (1998), a memoir; and the book-length study, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (2004). Both volumes were very well-received, and deservedly so. *June-Tree* suggests that Balakian's poems also deserve a close look.

Balakian has been a poet longer than he has been a writer, scholar or essayist. His well-honed lines and mature, confident style suggest as much. The majority of the poems in the recent volume speak of loss, both personal and national. The more recent poems speak especially of the effect of the past on the present, its presence in the lives of people, particularly in the Armenian experience.

Balakian has always been a peculiar "observer" of that experience. Perhaps a better word is "witness," fraught as it is with connotations of bearing witness to a tragedy or an instance of wrongdoing. His memoir, *Black Dog of Fate*, casts Balakian as the American-born Armenian re-discovering his past. That gesture taps into two experiences simultaneously—not the "Armenian" and the "American" (each of which is by itself largely indistinguishable in the memoir, as well as in Balakian's own experience); it taps instead into the parallel experiences of a man of Armenian ancestry living in the United States and that of a man of American upbringing confronting Armenian historical reality.

What we might call these two "voices" exist simultaneously in Balakian's poems. Only on rare occasions is either voice heard on its own. An early poem, "Graham House, April '76" (from *Father Fisheye*, 1979), could have been written by a fifth-generation American of nameless ancestry:

When I wake, the gutters are spiles
of ice, and the magnolia scratches
the window. Guerillas split Beirut,
and Nolan Ryan's worth half a million—
the voice on the tiny Zenith sputters.

Up north trout are game and the Stone Jug's
full of men, and boys who would be men.

Here are all the elements of American life—baseball, fishing, a domestic television set, and a local bar where boys and men spend their off hours. The only shrill tone is sounded by the mention of Beirut. But it is not entirely clear which experience is directed at the flickering TV at this particular moment, the “knowing” concern of the immigrant, or the indiscriminate glance of the local.

The most compelling moments in the collection bring these two experiences to bear on each other. The interplay and friction between them produce sometimes extraordinary flights of thought, language and experience.

A poem from Balakian’s most recent collection before this latest one (*Dyer’s Thistle*, 1996), “Geese Flying Over Hamilton, New York,” looks back to the loss of human life in Cambodia and elsewhere:

and the radio sounded like fuzz
on a boom mike,

the rhetoric needling in about the dead in Croatia.

The radio delivers news, which comes in “like fuzz.” It seems that, like the television set earlier, this vehicle of transmission also garbles the message it transmits, as though the events it is reporting have already become irrelevant, lost in a past more tragic for its inaccessibility:

My daughter will flick a switch,
And a stuffed chair will be a place for light to coalesce.

After dinner and a good bottle of Bordeaux
The sky floats like a numb pillow of radar.

Down here the dark is warm
Like ordinary death.

The poem concludes with what amounts to a complete separation between then and now, between a past both “warm” and “ordinary” and a present ambient with its own artificial light. The “fuzzy” radio transmission suggests the tragic enormity of news that doesn’t get through, what Balakian calls in another poem (“After the Survivors are Gone,” from *Dyer’s Thistle*, 1996) “things that stick in the ear.”

Past and present collide in an earlier poem, “The History of Armenia” (from *Sad Days of Light*, 1983), in which the speaker imagines his grandparents, who lived through the Genocide, alive in the present, in his home town:

Last night
my grandmother returned
in her brown dress

standing on Oraton Parkway
where we used to walk
and watch the highway
being dug out.
She stood against
a backdrop of steam hammers
and bulldozers,
a bag of fruit
in her hand,
the wind blowing
through her eyes.

...

When I told her
I was hungry, she said,
in the grocery store
a man is standing
to his ankles in blood,
the babies in East Orange
have disappeared,
maybe eaten
by the machinery
on this long road.

The memory of the past lives on in the present, and the result is almost unbearably brutal, modern construction machinery taking the place of Turkish soldiers (though they are never specifically mentioned but left to the reader's imagination.). The poem ends with a description of the early morning deportation of the speaker's grandfather:

They came for him
before the birds were up—
he left without shoes
or tie, shirt or suspenders.
It was quiet.
The birds, the birds
were still sleeping.

The note of quiet resignation underscores the inhumanity of the act, but with a complete lack of sentimentality that speaks to the power and substance of Balakian's poems.

Balakian's most remarkable poem is undoubtedly "Oriental Rug" (from perhaps the most effective collection, *Dyer's Thistle*, 1996), in which the speaker's imagination meanders with the curves and images woven into the rug in the title, brought from "Eastern Turkey, once Armenia:"

The splintering green wool
bled from juniper berries
seemed to seep, even then,

into the wasp-nest cells
breathing in their tubular ways
inside my ear and further back.

The berries on the rug remind the speaker of wasp cells and somehow transform themselves into the canal of the inner ear and finally lead the mind's eye "further back," into the historical imagination. The poem concludes when the "dyes" come apart and "break the grid of threads" and reconvene in an image of both loneliness and hope:

Tyrian purple from a mollusk shell
lodged in Phoenician sand—
gurgle all your passion in my ear.

The "passion" in this case "gurgles" into the disembodied "ear" of a beached shell. The things that would "stick in the ear" (as the other poem had it) are released back into the course of human history.

It is impossible, in this brief discussion, to do the rest of the poem justice. Suffice it to say that it represents the best of Balakian's poetry over the last thirty years. A final comparison to the poem "Flat Sky of Summer," which addresses similar themes, is instructive. In this case, the letters on the page drawn by famed Armenian illuminator, Toros Roslyn, take the place of those on the tapestry, allowing Balakian's imagination once again to weave past and present, in almost literal terms. If the result in this poem is somewhat less successful, it is because it sounds a note of sentimentality, as do a number of the thirteen new poems, especially "In Armenia, 1987." The fact takes nothing away from Balakian's work. But it suggests that the most compelling representation of the Armenian experience is the one that allows the past to speak for itself.

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