

Critics' Forum
Literature
Genocide and the Historical Imagination
By Hovig Tchalian

*April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.*

It is difficult in the month of April to escape the temptation, the seeming inevitability, of writing on a topic dealing with the Genocide. The necessity of that exercise in this “cruellest month” perhaps renders the famous opening lines of T. S. Eliot’s epic poem, *The Wasteland*, now become cliché, nonetheless an apt epigraph to this article.

The occasion that prompted the article is another look back – this time to the recent publication of the new edition (2007) of a book by Samantha Power and one by Peter Balakian that appeared a year after the first publication of Power’s book.

The year 2002 saw the original publication of Samantha Power’s moving, brutal, Pulitzer Prize-winning account of America’s failure to halt the perpetration of genocide in the twentieth century, “*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), the first chapter of which concerns the Armenian Genocide. A year later, Peter Balakian published his own well-known and award-winning account, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America’s Response* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).

Balakian himself looks back to Power, noting in his Preface that she and other historians affirm that the Genocide comprises “the template for most of the genocide[s] that followed in the twentieth century” (*Burning Tigris*, xiv). Here, Balakian follows the well-trodden path of many Genocide advocates before him in arguing that recognizing past genocides helps prevent future ones. His statement is qualitatively no different, in fact, than what Power also mentions – herself echoing countless others before her – that Hitler justified the Jewish Holocaust based at least in part on history’s feeble response to the Armenian Genocide (“*A Problem from Hell*,” 23).

But Balakian’s explicit purpose in *The Burning Tigris* is also much larger than what this statement alone would suggest – it is to reinstate the Genocide as a central, perhaps *the* central, human rights calamity in American history. As Balakian puts it (*Burning Tigris*, xiii):

“A PROBLEM FROM HELL”

America
and the
Age of Genocide



SAMANTHA POWER

The U.S. response to the Armenian crisis, which began in the 1890's and continued into the 1920's, was the first international human rights movement in American history and helped define the nation's emerging global identity. It seems that no other international human rights issue has ever preoccupied the United States for such a duration. . . . The breadth and intensity of the American engagement in the effort to save the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire is an important chapter in American history, and one that has been lost. It is also one from which Americans today can learn a great deal.

Balakian proposes a historical perspective that would help explain America to itself by pointing to a crime that coincides with a seminal moment in American nationhood and identity, akin to the widespread displacement and killing of Native Americans in the expansion of the U.S. across the American continent in the 18th and 19th centuries. In this case, however, the crime is not that of the perpetrator but of the historical witness and advocate turned bystander and accomplice.

Balakian's argument in effect encompasses a second historical tragedy, one akin to Genocide denial, which, as Balakian later points out (quoting Emory University's Deborah Lipstadt), stands as the "final stage of genocide," because it "strives to reshape human history in order to demonize the victims and rehabilitate the perpetrators" (xix). The crime here is an even more subtle one – the American nation betrays the Armenian victims of the crime by first betraying itself, by forgetting or ignoring the advocacy of many prominent Americans in its own past who called for recognition and response. Among them were the likes of industrialist John D. Rockefeller, feminist social critic Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writer Stephen Crane, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau, Sr., former President Theodore Roosevelt, and poet Ezra Pound, who was also, ironically, instrumental in the final edits to Eliot's *Wasteland*, published in 1922, when debates about the proper response to "the Armenian Question" still raged.

Balakian's argument casts him in the quintessential role of the immigrant's son, speaking at once for his Armenian past and his American present. His approach accomplishes a complex objective – providing the hope and promise of restoring a lost fragment of America's own past through the transformative, redemptive act of restoring to Armenians a measure of social and historical justice already embedded in American political history. In essence, the well-worn path of Balakian's argument about Genocide prevention comes across a sideways path into the American psyche; by retracing the arc of the victim's (and his own national) history – that of obsessively revisiting the past – Balakian ends up recasting it in terms of the eyewitness's personal and national narrative. Balakian's Armenian-American identity allows entrée into the American psyche. And from that perspective, at least, the personal precedes the historical; self-betrayal precedes the betrayal of the victims.

We might say, in this regard, that while the *explicit* argument of Balakian's text is to hold up a mirror to the American conscience, its *implicit* one is grappling with the difficult task of historical reconstruction – that of belatedness, or the difficulty in the distanced present of rehabilitating an event now lost to it. The American tragedy simply reenacts history's more primal betrayal – of itself.

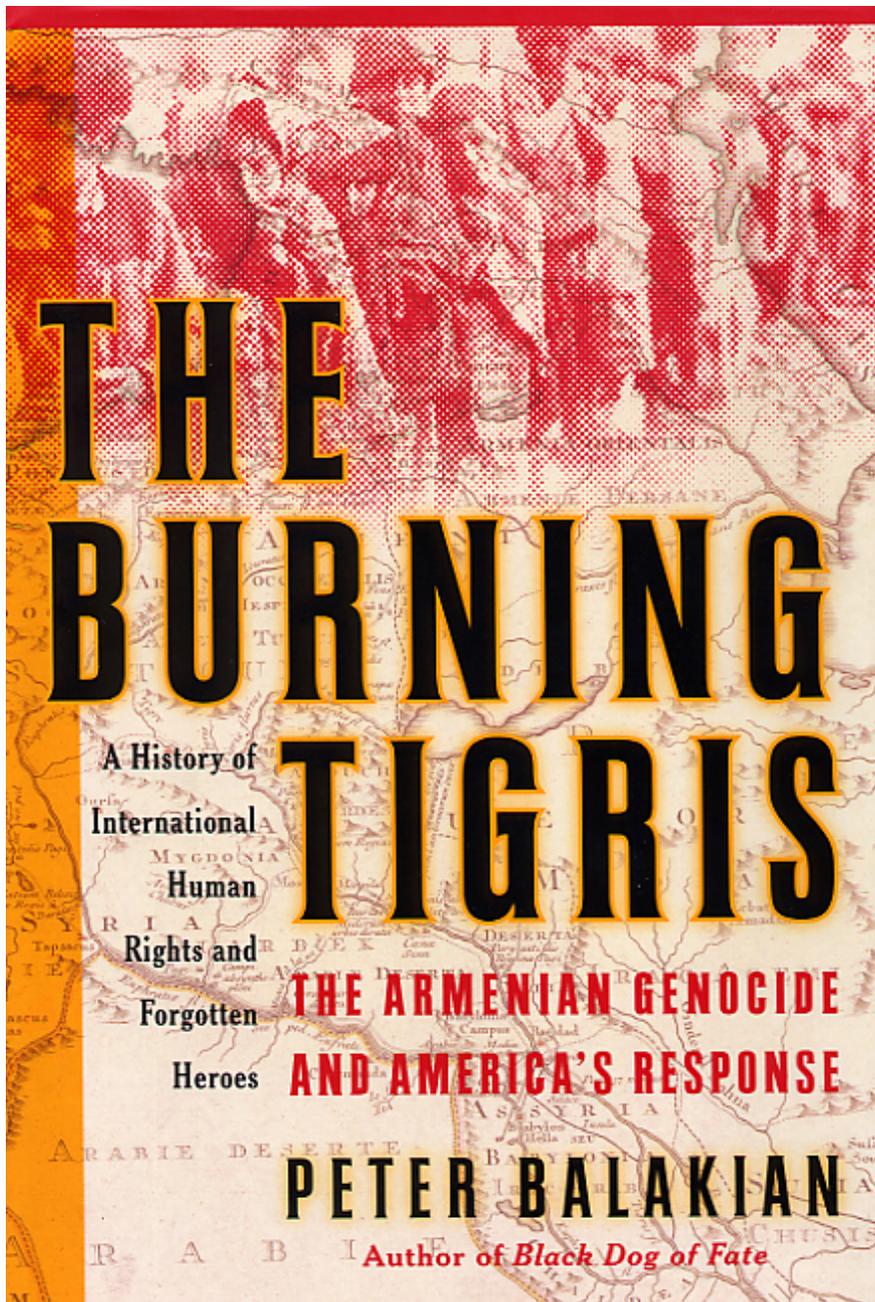
What makes Balakian's rendering especially effective, however, is its ability to personalize the historical, to make its belatedness matter to the eyewitness (almost) as much as it does to the victim. In this recapitulation, what appears as another tragic, hopeless attempt at recovery simply reinforces the personal commitment – to recognition, to a clear and unambiguous response – required to make it real; the historical argument solidifies into the simple need to act.

America's tragic failure to be true to itself and its own past unites Balakian's book with Power's. A single, complex question haunts both texts: "What is the role of the most powerful nation in the world when the ultimate crime is being perpetrated in plain view? . . . Why is U.S. policy evasive, sluggish, resistant to action . . . and often tinged with denial?" (xiii-xiv).

Both texts argue that, when viewed from the personal as well as the historical perspective, resistance becomes denial, complacency shades into complicity. In doing so, they follow individual but parallel paths that render them mirror images of each other. Balakian speaks as the American-born son of Armenian immigrants, carrying that experience with him into the American historical landscape. Power instead takes her (non-Armenian) readers along for a journey into the Armenian (and Jewish and Cambodian . . .) psyche. Both render the position of neutrality an impossible one to inhabit by compelling their audiences to re-examine the role of the historical eyewitness, balanced uneasily between the two poles of victim and perpetrator.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Balakian emphasizes the importance of "survivor accounts," which, he argues rightly, "are a profound part of history and allow us into regions we would not otherwise come to know" (xviii). Without the benefit of that perspective, Power instead begins her narrative several years later. Her first chapter, "Race Murder," opens interestingly in 1921 Berlin, where Soghomon Tehlirian assassinated Mehmet Talaat, Turkey's former Interior Minister and one of the masterminds behind the Genocide.

Power thus begins not with the historical question, but as the instincts of any good reporter or novelist might suggest, with the historical *actor*. In fact, she begins with the exact moment of the assassination, repeating in the course of her description the words Tehlirian reportedly spoke as he pulled the trigger: "This is to avenge the death of my family" ("*A Problem from Hell*," 1). By beginning with the pathos of Tehlirian's act of vengeance, Power has the reader immediately occupy a position other than his own, one with its own peculiar and compelling complexities. Tehlirian is at once a self-appointed avenger and a victim of Genocide – Power soon reminds us that Tehlirian was himself dragged to Der-el-Zor and clubbed on the head, awaking to find himself in the midst of carnage, the lone survivor among his village and family.



Power's dramatization of Tehlirian's assassination plot addresses Balakian's implicit argument of "belatedness" introduced above – of Armenians pressing for recognition and Americans struggling with response. Tehlirian has both suffered the crime and looks back to its commission six years later, embodying at once the dual and contradictory roles of victim and latecomer.

In a sense, the scene Power depicts dramatizes the moment of redemption offered by Balakian. Her version of Tehlirian's act re-imagines the near-tragedy of American complicity through complacency as a moment of high conviction. In the person of

Tehirian, Power introduces the vagaries of the latecomer only to dissolve them in a moment of action; as a survivor – in essence, a near-victim – Tehirian has lived to tell about it and, more importantly, to act on his experience and knowledge. Balakian’s retracing of the Armenian psyche into the American finds its parallel in Power’s substitution of Tehirian’s action for America’s own. Without romanticizing the assassination itself, Power uses it as a clear and unmistakable call for response.

Balakian’s *Burning Tigris* and Power’s “*A Problem from Hell*” share an acute sense of personal identity and responsibility. It is that sensibility that allows the two authors to re-imagine the respective roles of the historical witness and the original victim from within the context of personal and national commitment, a daunting feat normally accomplished in the best fiction.

And yet perhaps this is not entirely surprising – many great works of historical writing also share with literature a profound sense of the power of the historical imagination. By pointing the way to personal and national advocacy, action and response, the two authors also highlight the hazards of the historical imagination, which expresses itself in the struggle over evidence and the interminable polemic about points of view.

Powers reminds us that this “debate” started with the historical actors themselves. She recounts an encounter between Ambassador Morgenthau and Mehmet Talaat in which the latter is said to have offered these chilling words about his government’s responsibility (arguably more chilling than Hitler’s later proclamation about this same instance, now in the past), “‘We don’t give a rap for the future!’ he exclaimed. ‘We live only in the present,’” later adding to a German reporter, “‘we have been reproached for making no distinction between the innocent Armenians and the guilty.’ . . . ‘But that was utterly impossible, in view of the fact that those who were innocent today might be guilty tomorrow’” (8). The words represent a sinister version of the collective guilt and expiation of the American nation imagined by Balakian and Power, which has here already been cast as the inevitable collective “guilt” of the entire Armenian race. In moments such as these, *Burning Tigris* and “*A Problem from Hell*” remind us that it is perhaps the cruelest of April’s ironies that the historical imagination itself is what can most easily betray us.

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Hovig Tchalian holds a PhD in English literature from UCLA. He has edited several journals and also published articles of his own.

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