

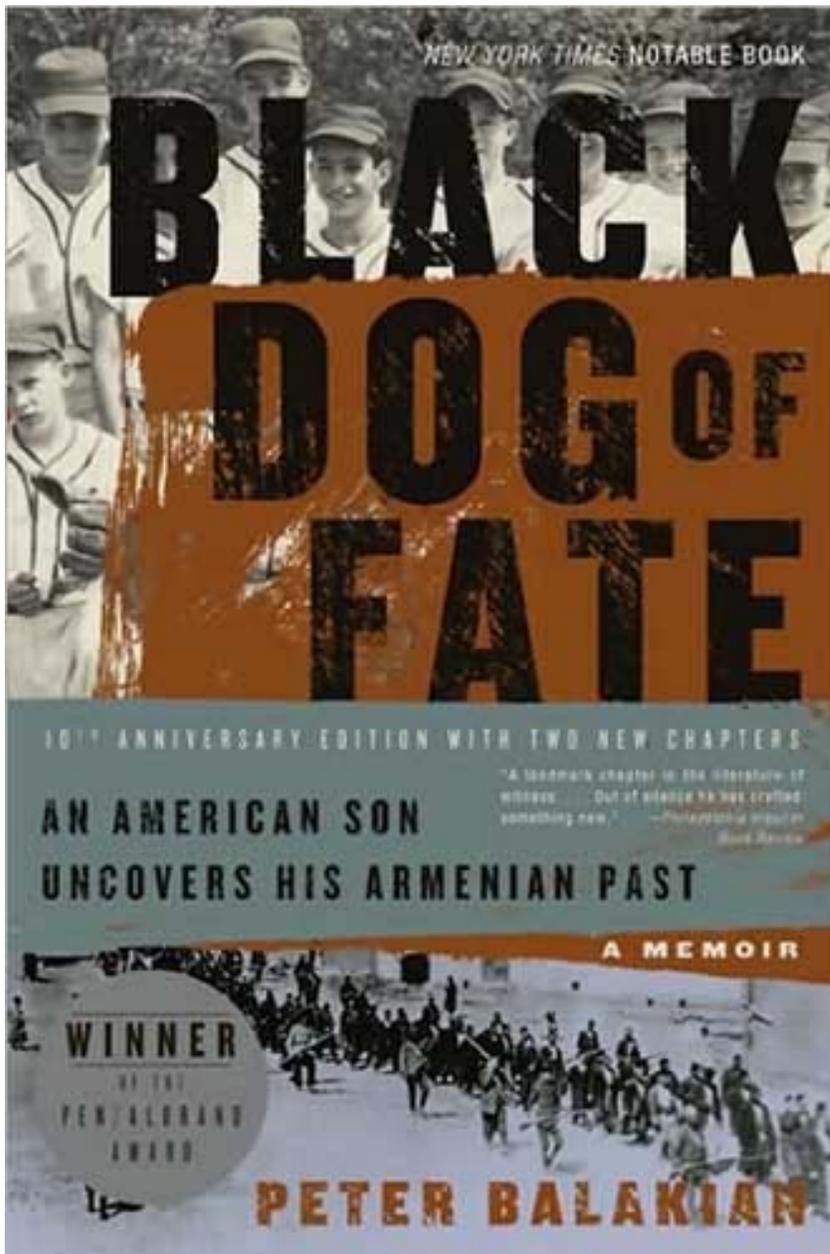
Critics' Forum

Literature

Myth and Memoir in *Black Dog of Fate*

By Hovig Tchalian

The winter of 2009 saw the publication of the 10th anniversary edition of Peter Balakian's award-winning 1997 *Black Dog of Fate: A Memoir* (Basic Books, NY: 2009). The book bears, on its cover, the additional subtitle, *An American Son Uncovers His Armenian Past*.



The description aptly encompasses not only this volume but Balakian's broader stance vis-à-vis his Armenian identity – he has consistently cast himself as the outsider looking in or, perhaps more accurately, *inward*. The metaphor in the additional subtitle is not, significantly, that of discovering but rather of *uncovering*. The former suggests a narrative and an identity of accident and distance (signaled in part by the prefix “dis,” suggesting separation). The Italian explorer Columbus, we say, “discovered” America on an expedition to the New World. That particular discovery even includes an explicit element of accident – legend says that, thinking he had landed in Asia, Columbus called the natives he encountered “Indians.” The central trope of discovery is the outsider's chance encounter.

Uncovering the past, as in Balakian's phrasing, has an entirely different valence. As the speaker of his memoir, Balakian uncovers – in effect, unveils – his Armenian heritage. The sense is of something already there that needs to be identified or revealed. The analogy, in this case, is not of an expedition but of a recognition. Balakian is “born” Armenian. But in the course of living his suburban New Jersey life, as the memoir tells it, he makes the requisite effort to find out about his Armenian heritage. Unlike the role of discovering, that of uncovering demands the presence of the quintessential insider – the Armenian born into American life, the child growing up in a world at once familiar and unfamiliar, one whose contours conceal the shape of a yet deeper experience. The metaphor of geographical distance is replaced by that of psychological depth, of plumbing one's “true” self. Gone as well is the element of accident that animates the narrative of discovering. Uncovering one's heritage becomes, as in Balakian's memoir, a narrative not of chance but inevitability.

The act of discovering and that of uncovering define what we might think of as the two limits of a wider range of experience. At one end, defined by the act of uncovering, lies what we identified as the narrative of depth and inevitability. Here lies the domain of memoir, which uncovers or reveals the speaker's true, “authentic” self. At the other end, defined by the act of discovering, lies what we identified as the narrative of chance and accident. We might think of this domain (admittedly, somewhat reductively) as that of myth or poetry, employing the element of surprise – of unlikely juxtapositions and unexpected finds.

Balakian has himself long been working in this domain. In fact, he started out writing poetry, his first volume, *Father Fisheye*, having appeared 30 years ago now, in 1979. Memoirs, such as *Black Dog*, came later. Historical ones, such as *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (2003), came even later. This third genre is what we might, in line with the previous discussion, refer to as the narrative of recovery, defined in both its psychological and historical meanings. Psychologically, the term encompasses recovery from an often traumatic experience, such as killing or genocide. Historically, it envisions the motivated act of rehabilitation, of rescue. In this case, significantly, the “distance” that must be overcome is neither that of space nor depth, but of time. As such, recovery is characterized by a narrative of witness and

testimony, of loss and redemption. The act of recovering therefore falls somewhere between those of discovering and uncovering, of myth and memoir.

Balakian's *Black Dog*, then, is not a memoir, in perhaps the truest sense. A memoir tells a life story from the perspective of the teller. And Balakian's certainly does. But while *uncovering* his Armenian identity, Balakian also attempts to *recover* the experience of his grandmother Nafina's past. Nafina – whose name is Armenian for Athena, Balakian informs us (3) – is a genocide survivor who finds herself in Aleppo, Syria with her two daughters and eventually rejoins Balakian's family in New Jersey. In that sense, *Black Dog* occupies a peculiar position: vis-à-vis its author, it is indeed a memoir; but in relation to Nafina, the survivor of genocide whose tale the book also tells, it is closer to a history, more akin to *Burning Tigris*.

The tension between memoir and history, survivor narrative and witness account, permeates Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate*. The effect is somewhat akin to reading the account in *The Diary of Anne Frank* recounted through her grandson's experience. Throughout the book, the reader is aware of a subtle tension between Balakian's experience, that of witness, and his grandmother's, that of survivor. Her presence near the family and Balakian's close relationship with her helps him discover his true identity. Along with that experience, however, comes her own, that of a brutal, genocidal past. In *Black Dog*, Balakian's own experience comes to stand in, ironically, tragically, for her loss.

Numerous moments in Balakian's narrative try to take account of this distance separating witness and survivor. Interestingly, Balakian initiates his quest to uncover his own past by way of a historical account. As a young boy, he picks up a copy of *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, originally published in 1919. The book is an eyewitness account of the previous decade, written while Morgenthau served as U.S. Ambassador to Turkey. Balakian describes reading it while riding a bus to work, in New York: "By the time the bus came rattling over the potholes of Knickerbocker Road, I was lost in my father's birthplace. Ships moored the Bosphorus. The water, green, tepid, caïque-flecked, the glitter of silver. Terraced clumps of fig and olive trees. The dome of Hagia Sophia, golden, with minarets jutting up. Men in fezzes. Smells of *shashlik* and sewage in the streets" (155). The only discordant note in this initial description is the closing mention of sewage. Having just begun reading the account, Balakian is not yet immersed in its intricacies. He is, as he suggests, "lost" in a world that seems at once fantastic and imaginary. Describing neither his experience nor his grandmother's, his prose is staid and confident, with the "accidental" air of the explorer, the nonchalance of a tourist.

This apparent calm is broken in a number of places in the narrative, soon after Balakian delves more deeply into Morgenthau's account. A statement near the end of Balakian's book, in which he tries to come to terms with the stories his grandmother has begun telling him, encapsulates the change: "When I think of the stories she slipped to me in the odd moments of her daily routines, or the dreams, folktales, and half-repressed images I was privy to during the last six years of her life, it seems clear now that they were part of

a truncated narrative about what she had gone through as a young woman” (301). And again a bit further on: “In odd, isolated moments – moments that seemed to be out of time – I had been privy to some of her intense sensory images, to her telescopic memory, to Genocide flashbacks. This was how she told me about her past. The Armenian invocation, *djamangeen gar oo chagar* – there was and there wasn’t – was like the intrusive past, which seemed to appear out of time, like lyric memory that had been activated” (301). In fact, the easy “lyricism” of the earlier passage, describing the haunts of Balakian’s father’s childhood, is replaced by a somewhat circular prose, marked by sometimes tortured metaphors, and repeatedly interrupted by references to time. The passages here both describe and enact the difficulty of circumscribing the survivor account within the coming of age story turned witness narrative.

The most explicit instances of this tension between recovering and uncovering, between the positions of witness and survivor, respectively, can be found in the two new chapters added to the 10th anniversary edition of *Black Dog of Fate*. In them, Balakian tells of his 2005 trip to Aleppo and Der Zor. In Aleppo, Balakian discovers, housed in an Armenian cathedral, records of his grandmother’s arrival in the city, the nearest he can get to a diary of her now remote experiences. Later, he is led to the place where she lived in 1915. The narrative begins, once again, quite accidentally. The search initially leads to several miscues and cases of mistaken identity, as directions provided by locals lead Balakian and his guide through similar-looking streets and alleys. The search ends, somewhat anti-climactically, in another ordinary-looking street: “In a couple of minutes,” Balakian recounts, “we were standing on a street not much different than many of the streets we had walked down in the past hour” (327).

When he finally locates the house itself, Balakian describes the scene in much the same terms: “And then I walked farther down the street, until I found myself in front of 45 Ghuri Street. My grandmother’s home in 1915. A place never spoken of, never mentioned in her next life in New Jersey, the life in which I knew her. I looked up at an ordinary, ocher-stone two-story building that still seemed to be a residence. . . . Who lived there now? Who had lived there in the past 90 years? What did it matter? It was a plain house with an archway and a black door and a couple of windows with closed shutters...” (328). Balakian’s impossible search for recovery leads him to an ordinary house in an ordinary part of town in Aleppo, no closer to his grandmother’s experience than “in her next life in New Jersey,” in which Balakian “knew her.”

The attempt to recover the past as it really was, to bear witness in full, is at the heart of Balakian’s *Black Dog of Fate*. It is a topic that has fascinated, even obsessed, the poet and author, in his memoir as well as his more historical work and his poetry. In a poetically charged moment near the middle of the present book, Balakian tries to convey the difficulty of the task, by way of a historical reference to the building of Armenian churches: “I pictured those wind-bitten stone churches built out of the Armenian highlands of Anatolia, with their wooden belfries preferred by Ottoman law so that no bell could be heard. I could hear those wooden clappers making a thump like a muffled throat” (162). The passage is reminiscent of a line in T. S. Eliot’s “Wasteland” that

describes the Greek mythical character Philomela, whose tongue was cut off to prevent her from revealing the identity of her rapist, singing “‘jug jug’ to dirty ears.” The passage is equally reminiscent of a line in one of Balakian’s own poems, “Oriental Rug,” in which the purple dyes in the tapestry break apart and “gurgle” their “passion in my ear.” Like the garbled, inaudible voices in those poems, the muffled “thump” of the clappers conveys in poetic form the difficulty of the inescapably *historical* task of righting the past.

Midway through *Black Dog*, Balakian explicitly mentions, in fact, that he tried to capture his grandmother’s experience in one of his poems, “History of Armenia.” “The poem,” Balakian explains, “can be a headstone in a world of unmarked graves. . . . There, I could bring the two of us together again and create what she had in her encoded way told me. I realized that she was my beloved witness, and I the receiver of her story” (195). It is difficult not to see in Balakian’s act of imagination both an admirable gesture and a tragic reversal of sorts. While the historical act of recovery would place both Balakian and his grandmother in close proximity to each other – he as the receiver (and re-teller) of a brutal past, and she as its conveyer, what Balakian now calls its “witness” – and unite them in the joint effort at historical recovery, as the “originary” teller of her own story, she is at once witness *and* survivor. It is in moments such as these that we are reminded that the struggle to mend the past, to recover it across the distance of history, may hinge precisely on the fine distinction, the subtle separation, between myth and memoir.

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