

Critics' Forum

Literature

The Task of the Translator: *Armenian Golgotha* and the Conspiracy of History

By Hovig Tchalian

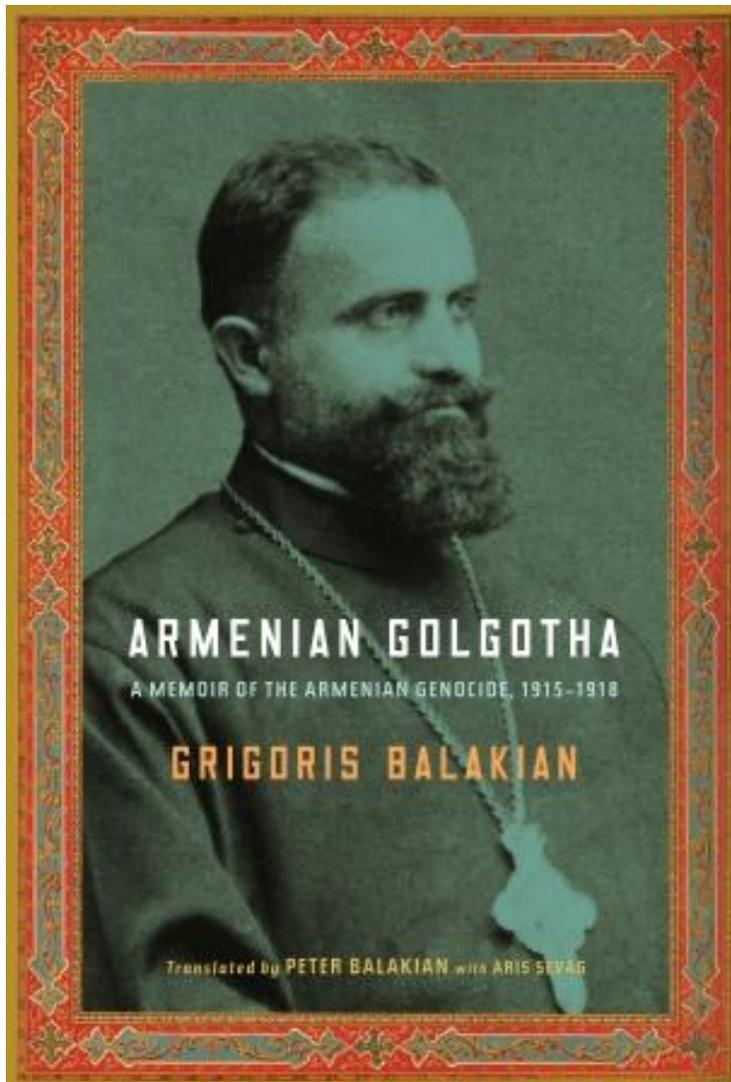
A film about the Armenian Genocide, *Ravished Armenia*, was recently screened in Pasadena's Armenian Center. The film, directed by Eric Nazarian, is thought to be the first about the Genocide made in the United States.

The film is in part a retelling of the Genocide memoir of Aurora Mardiganian, published soon after she came to the United States in 1918. Interestingly, the film is also a partial reconstruction of the book's original film version, made in 1919 and now lost. As the announcement of the film suggests, paraphrasing the book's editor, "it would seem that history conspired to destroy *Ravished Armenia*, the only personal filmed record of what took place between 1915 and 1918."

Unlike other films based on books, therefore, this one has an unusually complex history that includes reconstructions of both print and film versions, in the larger context of Genocide reconstruction. And yet, the process of making even this complex a film – about a film, about a memoir, about historical events – relies fundamentally, like all others, on the reconstitutive act of *translation*, across genres, cultures and historical periods. The act of reconstituting the memoir and the story it tells is susceptible to the historical "conspiracy" mentioned in the film announcement, it seems, precisely because it is grounded in translation.*

The complexity of translation can be better demonstrated, perhaps, with a seemingly simpler example, the translation of a Genocide memoir from Armenian into English. The example in this case is the April 2009 publication, into English, of *Armenian Golgotha* (New York: Knopf, 2009), the Armenian-language memoir of a Genocide survivor, the priest Grigoris Balakian, translated by his great-nephew, the poet, author and scholar, Peter Balakian.

The memoir is lengthy – the English edition extends to over 500 pages. The process of translating it took the better part of ten years, with several translators collaborating with its chief translator, Peter Balakian, to complete it. Understandably, therefore, completing a translation of this magnitude may encounter numerous difficulties along the way, some mundane and others profound. As the translator suggests, for instance, there is the difficulty of his great uncle's early 20th-century Armenian to contend with (xxix). But even this seemingly mundane issue of translation encompasses two distinct aspects – the historical and the cultural. Grigoris Balakian's Armenian has to be translated across the decades and, only then, cross the cultural and linguistic threshold from Armenian into English.



As the German-Jewish intellectual and critic Walter Benjamin suggests in his essay “The Task of the Translator” about the German and French versions of the word “pain,” “In ‘*Brof*’ and ‘*pain*’ the intended object is the same, but the mode of intention differs. It is because of their modes of intention that the two words signify something different to a German or a Frenchman, that they are not regarded as interchangeable, and in fact ultimately seek to exclude one another.” (Benjamin’s choice of words, “pain,” is not without irony here. As a Jew, he fled Nazi persecution, only to commit suicide in 1940, on the brink of capture on the Spanish border.) In this early statement in Benjamin’s essay, the separation of the German and French languages embedded as a fissure in the notion of pain itself, rent as it is between two different “modes of intention,” suggests a fundamental obstacle to overcome, a determining mechanism of translation.

Since English is the modern *lingua franca*, translating words into English places the translator at the cross-roads of many more than two languages and cultures. In *Armenian Golgotha*, for instance, place names act as a potentially divisive obstacle. While Peter

Balakian's co-translator, Aris Sevag, only mentions them briefly, he nevertheless hints that making the memoir accessible to the widest possible readership entailed the apparently unthinkable, replacing Armenian place names with their Turkish ones, which have, ironically, gained much wider currency (xliii).

The act of translating a historical memoir such as *Armenian Golgotha*, therefore, is fundamentally wedded to history. As Benjamin is acutely aware, times change, and with them historically derived uses and conventions: "For in its continuing life, which could not be so called if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the original is changed. Established words also have their after-ripening. ... What once sounded fresh may come to sound stale, and what once sounded idiomatic may later sound archaic." The writer of the memoir himself is caught in this historical flux. As Peter Balakian admits, his great-uncle is susceptible to the conventions and faults of his age: "sometimes he essentializes Turks in a racialist way characteristic of the period" (xviii).

These at times more mundane considerations become, in Benjamin's rendering, characteristic of the separation of languages and, through the attempt at uniting them, part of a larger struggle that yokes history and language: "If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translation, it does so otherwise than through the vague similarity of original and copy. For it is clear that kinship does not necessarily involve similarity. ... Wherein can the kinship of two languages be sought, apart from a historical kinship?"

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the roles of historical witness and ordinary writer are difficult to disentangle, even at the memoir's inception. In this regard, the struggle of translating *Armenian Golgotha* ninety years after the fact first manifests itself in the act of writing the memoir, itself caught in the mesh of history. In his Author's Preface, Grigoris Balakian clearly expresses his feelings of inadequacy and uneasiness at depicting the events of 1915. In fact, he presents himself as a historian of sorts, one desperately needed by the rapidly dwindling Armenian nation: "Although you had many writers, poets, novelists, playwrights, and especially journalists and editors, you never had a historian" (456).

The feeling of deep ambivalence that the act of committing his observations to print precipitates for Grigoris Balakian has its source in the historical events he is witnessing. The writer sounds as unsure about the prospects of doing justice to what he sees as he is adamant about his need to make the attempt: "I myself felt both weak at heart and of pen, to write about the great annihilation that surpasses even the bloodiest pages of human history" (454). But as his confession suggests, this unambiguous profession of personal inadequacy primarily reflects the "surpassing" magnitude of the events he sees unfolding before him. Balakian makes this aspect of the telling explicit only two pages later in the same preface: "Never doubt my story of the great crime, and never think that what has been written herein has been in any way exaggerated. On the contrary, I have written the bare minimum, because it is not humanly possible to describe the horrific and ineffable martyrdom of over one million dead sons and daughters" (454).

As the author puts it, it is his gargantuan task of making “a critical analysis of your [i.e., Armenia’s] real inner life hidden behind the curtain” (456), what he calls a page later “veiled secret moments,” that causes him considerable anxiety: “as you had no historian, it was a thankless task to truthfully write this chapter of contemporary Armenian history with its veiled secret moments and, in so doing, to become everyone’s enemy” (457). Balakian’s “thankless task” encompasses not only witnessing the genocidal events but having to relive them in the retelling, coupled with the awesome burden of conveying them to posterity, whole and intact.

Balakian’s attempt to reveal the “secrets” hidden behind the historical curtain bears an uncanny resemblance to Benjamin’s description of the translator’s encounter with a similar “secret,” the truth or “message” lodged in the language of the poet he seeks to translate: “But what then is there in a poem – and even bad translators concede this to be essential – besides a message? Isn’t it generally acknowledged to be the incomprehensible, the secret, the “poetic”? That which the translator can render only insofar as he – also writes poetry?” The truth of the original memoir that Peter Balakian, or any other translator, is concerned about ‘capturing’ corresponds in this particular memoir of Genocidal atrocities to what Grigoris Balakian refers to as the “ineffable martyrdom” of the victims, both in turn reflecting what Benjamin locates in the hard, intractable “kernel” that resists any attempt to translate it, through language and across history: “[translation] nevertheless at least points, with wonderful penetration, toward the predetermined, inaccessible domain where languages are reconciled and fulfilled. The original does not attain this domain in every respect, but in it lies that which, in a translation, is more than a message. This essential kernel can be more precisely defined as what is not retranslatable [*sic*] in a translation.”

But as we saw in Grigoris Balakian’s own confession, while the translator’s task is critical, it ultimately leads away from him and toward what the writer calls the “thankless task” of recomposition, of historical translation. The memoirist is a historian, because both translate. They are linked in their attempt at being true to the original, by what we might call their equally uneasy relationship to history – the translator’s to the memoir and the memoir’s to its own witness.

As such, the memoirist’s attempt at rendering the ineffable transcends any subsequently simple attempt at fidelity on the translator’s part. As Benjamin succinctly defines it, the “distinguishing mark of bad translation” is the “inexact transmission of an inessential content.” The act of truthfully translating “content” takes the translator far beyond a simple attempt at fidelity, the narrow effort of being true to the original. It confronts him instead with the far more daunting task of capturing its essence, of representing the ‘whole’ truth. Benjamin mentions the ideal translator’s role as a poet for a reason – not primarily because it makes him a better wordsmith but because it implies that he has what we might call, for lack of a better term, the ‘sensitivity’ of a poet. As Peter Balakian reminds us in his own preface, he is both a poet and a translator. But Benjamin’s rendering of the act of translation, as well as the circumstances of Grigoris Balakian’s memoir, suggest that we should see the reminder as a fundamentally *historical* act – not a

mention of the translator's appropriate skills or abilities so much as a summoning of his correspondingly appropriate *identity* for taking on his task.

Benjamin's emphasis on this correspondence that transcends fidelity points to the central question surrounding any witness account – its value, beyond those of similar ones, in reinstating an otherwise dim historical reality. There are, after all, countless other observer accounts, including perhaps the best known, that of the Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the American Ambassador to Turkey at the time. What seems to distinguish Grigoris Balakian's account is its status as memoir. As both eyewitness and survivor of the atrocities, Balakian is at once an 'outsider' and an 'insider.'

Armenian Golgotha, therefore, bears a unique relationship to the events it describes, one available to only a small handful of eyewitness accounts. As Peter Balakian suggests, "many readers will find that *Armenian Golgotha*, because of its intimacy with Turkish culture and the Anatolian landscape, will be another important text that tells the story of the eradication of the Armenians from inside Turkey and reveals Turkish denial as a continued assault on truth" (xx). Peter Balakian is referring in part to the physical, literal landscape, the wilderness of Anatolia into which Grigoris Balakian escaped and in which he survived for four long years. But beyond that, the words evoke the larger milieu of Anatolian culture, politics and history that the memoir evokes. It is entirely fitting, therefore, that such a memoir is situated at the crossroads between two cultures, embedded as it is in the Anatolian landscape, "intimate" with Turkish as well as Armenian history and culture, its status as the ultimate witness against denial in part a result of straddling the threshold between them.

But can we, as a result, conjecture that the memoir's intimacy with its environment captures the writer's deep understanding of the victims' plight better than, say, Morgenthau's? While there is ample reason to do so, claiming the memoirist's status as an insider also presents a difficult conundrum – the fact itself shields others (that is, non-Armenians) from the truth. Keeping in mind Benjamin's rendering of the translator's complex and multi-layered task, it is worth considering that Armenians' own historical distance from the atrocities in their past is no more preferable to, say, Morgenthau's linguistic or cultural distance from the victims themselves. It is here that Benjamin's characterization of the translator's task is especially pertinent. By recognizing the inherent complexities of translation, he also hints at their ultimate resolution: "Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other, so translation, instead of making itself resemble the meaning of the original, must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpart to the original's mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language." *Armenian Golgotha* is a perfect instance of Benjamin's fragment, its correspondence with the Anatolian context suggesting their embedding in a "greater language."

But while Benjamin's prophetic words place the reconstitution of the primordial "vessel" in a supra-historical, *messianic* future, the task of both Balakians is nonetheless resolutely

historical. Peter Balakian's reference to Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish legal scholar who coined the term "genocide" in 1943, is telling in this regard: "While it is likely that Lemkin never read *Armenian Golgotha* because of the obstacle of translation, he had accrued a depth of understanding of the events of 1915 such that his own knowledge of the Armenian Genocide is vividly borne out by and embodied in Balakian's memoir" (xx). Balakian singles out "translation" as the primary "obstacle" facing Lemkin but one that never prevented him from "understanding" the victims' plight. While separated from the events of the Genocide by both historical and linguistic distance, Lemkin is able to 'translate' the events depicted in *Armenian Golgotha* – the memoir's Benjaminian "secret" or "kernel" – across the cultural-historical threshold by fashioning the same deep, visceral, understanding that the memoir "embodies." In other words, as a reader, Lemkin displays the kind of identity, the sensibility, required of the ideal translator.

Such an act of rewriting is, of course, also fraught with a kind of ambiguity at least as complex as the writer's own. That ambiguity represents in part, as we saw earlier, the uneasy moment of Grigoris Balakian's originary act of composing his memoir. But it is also the subsequent act of rewriting, of translating, the memoir across the cultural-historical divide that opens up the possibility of denial, which purports to be simply another, or different, re-writing, like the conflicting account in a historical trial, presented, in Peter Balakian's evocative phrasing, by a "testifier" (xxiii). Grigoris Balakian mentions, for instance, an early and more localized rewriting of history, a disturbingly subtle form of denial: German soldiers Grigoris Balakian meets speak of Armenians as money-hungry "Christian Jews," conflating Turkish rhetoric with German stereotypes, reinterpreting history at the very moment of its making (xviii). In moments such as these, what the sponsors of *Ravished Armenia* justifiably characterize as the anonymous "conspiracy" of history becomes a deliberate vehicle of betrayal.

As Walter Benjamin suggests, the attempt at reconstitution both enables and complicates the task of the translator. It is here that the burden – better, the responsibility – of translation takes on a deeply historical character. The publication of *Armenian Golgotha* in English brings to light the complex kernel, the "hidden secret," at the center of Grigoris Balakian's memoir. Its publication a year before the screening of *Ravished Armenia*, a film based on a lost original, also reminds us that, while no act of translation is immune to the conspiracy of history, it is also far from irrevocably subject to the betrayal of its agents.

*The Latin root of translation, *translatio*, means to "carry across."

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