

*Beyond the Lachrymose Conception of Armenian History: Introduction to Murat*

*Cankara Talk on Armeno-Turkish*

*Seboub D. Aslanian,*

*UCLA department of History*

*April 26, 2013*

The Great Crime of the genocide in all of its enormity and complexity has cast a long and dark shadow on Armenian identity and scholarship. As a result of genocide trauma and the state-sanctioned denial of this event, many Armenians around the world have succumbed to what I have called elsewhere, following the work of the great Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges, the “Funes el Memorioso effect.”<sup>1</sup> Borges, let us recall, brilliantly explores the perils of being crippled by a bloated memory of the past in his fascinating fictional tale, *Funes el memorioso*, where the central protagonist one day falls from his horse and instead of suffering from amnesia becomes a repository of the whole world’s memory. Unable to filter out anything from his memory, Funes becomes a living encyclopedia of all the events, sensations, moments and so on that have taken place since the beginning of the universe. His memory is disabling. I am probably not alone in thinking that the continued denial of the Armenian genocide has created a hypertrophied or Funes-like, bloated historical memory for most Armenians that has held them captive to a tragic chapter of their past. Even more vexing is the fact that in some narrow circles the trauma of the genocide has lent itself to shoring up a politics of exclusionary nationalism and has contributed to

---

<sup>1</sup> For Borges’ short story, see Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*. Trans. James E. Irby. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. I have elaborated on this story and the problematic nature of a hypertrophied memory of the Armenian genocide in my unpublished essay, “The Funes El Memorioso Effect.” My thoughts here are largely influenced by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s classic discussion in “Postscript: Reflections on Forgetting,” in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington D.C.: University of Washington Press, 2005),

making suspect attempts by scholars to emphasize the cosmopolitan, hybrid, cross-cultural, and connected aspects of Armenian identities and histories, especially where Turks and the “Islamic world” are concerned. One cannot and should not underestimate the heavy burden of the post-genocide trauma on the writing of Armenian history, and I would in no way wish to suggest that this dark chapter in history should be bracketed in any attempt to do a critical tock-taking of Armenian historiography. However, as understandable as the post-genocide fixation with maintaining identity and emphasizing the survivalist metanarrative of Armenian history may seem, it should not come at the expense of precluding interest in other kinds of histories and identities, ones that involve mixing and mingling, in short *metisage*, with other cultures and traditions including especially Muslim or Turkish ones, in which Armenians in the past have also engaged.

Perhaps nowhere has the dead weight of the genocide and its continued denial been more damaging than in the way Armenian scholars have looked at and interpreted the history of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic world in general. Here for understandable but unfortunate reasons, the hypertrophied memory of the genocide has produced what Salo Baron, historian of the Jewish diaspora, in a different context called the “lachrymose” conception of history along with its attendant insular narrative.<sup>2</sup> On the whole,

---

<sup>2</sup> I have elaborated on this issue in my unpublished essay, “From Autonomous to Interactive Histories: World History’s Challenge to Armenian Studies,” (unpublished paper, 2009). The reference here is to the work of the great historian of the Jewish diaspora, Salo Baron, who criticized what he called the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history” for its disposition to “view...the destinies of the Jews in the Diaspora as a sheer succession of miseries and persecutions.” Writing as early as the 1930s, Baron noted that “Jewish historiography has not been able to free itself [from its grasp] to this day.” (Quoted in David Engel, “Crisis and Lachrymosity: On Salo Baron, Neobaronianism, and the Study of Modern European Jewish History,” *Jewish History*, vol. 20, No. 3/4 (2006), 247. A similar critique of the “lachrymose” nature of much of Armenian (diasporan) history has yet to be made. I thank David Myers for bringing Baron’s work to my attention. For an application of Baron’s views to post-1967 Jewish revisionist historiography that has a “a gloomy representation of Jewish life in the lands of Islam that emphasizes the continuity of oppression and persecution from Muhammad to the demise of Arab Jewish communities in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war,” (Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of*

the trend has been to emphasize the miseries, hardships, and persecutions of diasporic life for the Armenians, especially those living in the various domains of the Ottoman Empire long before specific military, diplomatic, ideological, and other conjunctures in the last decades of the nineteenth century forever transformed Armenian life. This lachrymosity has resulted in sketches of Ottoman Armenian life that downplay creative cross-cultural interactions between Armenians and members of other millets of the Empire and has produced a simplistic image of Ottoman Armenians who are, as it were, left undisturbed in their national essence. The latter are either in the position of perennially “resisting” the corrupting Turkic and Muslim influences and thus remaining purely Armenian, or alternately, they are seen to be behind some of the greatest achievements of the Empire. In either case, what is often downplayed in Armenian scholarship is not only how Armenians creatively interacted with Turks and other members in what was, after all, a large multi-ethnic, multilingual and religiously diverse empire, but also how they were embedded in Ottoman society and culture and as such shared many of its norms and values and even actively participated in creating them. Vartan Pasha’s writing of the first Ottoman novel, *Akabi Hikayesi* (1851)<sup>3</sup> in Armeno-Turkish is a good case in point. Against the all-too-powerful urge to project backwards into Ottoman history assumptions and realities associated with the genocide and especially post genocide history of Armenians and Turks, we must stand steadfast as historians and seek areas and times in the Ottoman past where

---

*a Modern Diaspora*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1998, 14) see Mark R. Cohen, “The Neo-Lachrymose Conception of Jewish-Arab History,” *Tikkun*, 6/3 (1991): 55-60, and Idem., *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages (revised edition)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also Beinín’s work cited above. Needless to say, the lachrymose conception of Armeno-Turkish/Islamic history is a direct response to the denial of the Armenian genocide and will likely begin to change only after proper recognition of this event is made.

<sup>3</sup> See Börte Sagaster, “The Role of Turcophone Armenians as literary innovators and Meediators of Culture in the Early Days of Modern Turkish Literature.” in *Between Religion and Language: Turkish-Speaking Christians, Jews and Greek Speaking Muslims and Catholics in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Evangelina Balta and Mehmet Ölmez, (Istanbul: Eren, 2011): 101-110. (103ff)

both Armenians and Turks, as well as others, partook of cross-cultural interactions with relative freedom from violence and destruction.

This brings me to today's speaker who will be addressing the theme of cross-cultural relations between Armenians, Turks, and others in the Ottoman Empire by focusing on perhaps the most hybrid of things Ottoman Armenians created during the last several centuries of the empire's history, namely their mixed and cross-cultural language of Armeno-Turkish, or Ottoman Turkish written in Armenian script.

Murat Cankara studied physics and mathematics for two years before majoring in theory and history of theatre and receiving his PhD in Turkish literature from Bilkent University in 2011 with a dissertation titled "Empire and Novel: Placing Armeno-Turkish Novels in Ottoman/Turkish Literary Historiography." His PhD research focused on the novels written by Ottoman Armenians in the Turkish language using the Armenian script between 1850 and 1870. Apart from making a critique of historiography, he argues in his dissertation that the authors of the early Turkish novels in Armenian and Arabic scripts appropriated different and at times conflicting features of western romanticism.

Cankara is generally interested in the histories and literary cultures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and particularly in the birth of Turkish and Armenian novels. Tensions between literary romanticism and realism, cultural encounter among the Ottoman *millet*s, the appropriation of Turkish by Armenians, historiography of Ottoman literature, print culture in the Ottoman Empire, and theory of humor are also among his areas of interest.

Cankara's interest in Armenian culture began with the script and the photocopies of three Armeno-Turkish novels he got from the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul, the day Hrant Dink was shot. Eventually the script carried him over to the language and history. He

recently completed a year as a Manoogian Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan's Armenian Studies Program where he taught a course on Armeno-Turkish.

Recently, he has been increasingly attracted by the sociolinguistic aspect of Armeno-Turkish and is currently in the process of writing a comparative article using concepts such as “vernacularization,” “cosmopolitanism,” “language and violence.”