SIAMANTO'S DANCE

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Vahe Apelian, Ohio, October 2014

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The poem is often recited at commemorations of the Armenian Genocide, although it was written five years before 1915, the beginning of the Genocide. Its most graphic image probably is the scene in film director's Atom Egoyan's "Ararat". There again, it was presented to depict the horrors of the Genocide. Meanwhile, Armenian painters have depicted "The Dance" in canvas. Most lasting, of course, is its life-long etching in the memory of Armenian high school students who are taught the poem and about its celebrated author.

Siamanto published the poem in *"Կարմիր Լուրեր Բարեկամէս" (Garmir Lourer Pareghames, i.e. Bloody News From My Friend*). I used to wander why Siamanto gave the book such an odd title. Whenever I inquired about it, the customary explanation given to me amounted to no more than a repetition the title. It would take me decades to uncover the answer. It happened mid-way reading *The Black Dog of Fate*, the book that propelled Peter Balakian to the pinnacle of the Armenian-American literature, if not American literature as well. The book is as much an American experience as it is Armenian.

Balakian elaborates on the turn of events that lead to the naming of the Siamanto's book in his and Nevart Yaghlian's translation of Siamento's book. In the introduction Balakian wrote that while growing up, he had heard, during family conversations, that his grandfather, who had died more than a decade before Balakian was born, had something to do with a book of poetry very famous among the Armenians.

Balakian's grandfather Diran and Adom Yarjanian, the baptismal name of Siamanto, were friends and

came from middle- to upper-middle class families. Both went to Europe to further their studies. Diran studied medicine in Leipzig (Germany) and Yarjanian literature in Paris.

Diran returned to Constantinople in 1905 and started practicing medicine. In 1909, he went with a group of Armenian physicians, to Adana to help the survivors of one of the worst large-scale atrocities and killing perpetrated against the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. The tragedy is known in Armenian history as the Adana Massacre. The calamity was not confined to that city although it started there. It is estimated that some 30,000 Armenians were slaughtered by the Turks. The massacre was lamented in a popular song that is sung to this day. It is called The Lament of Adana (*Voghp Adanayi)* and may be heard on Youtube.

Diran Balakian recorded in letters the eyewitness accounts. Unfortunately, the letters were lost. There seem to be two accounts as to how his friend Yarjanian came to know of the massacre first hand. In one version, Balakian wrote to the poet. In another version, Balakian wrote home to his parents and Adom, being a family friend, read the letters when he visited them. In any event, it is to the news from Peter Balakian's paternal grandfather that Siamanto referred to in the title of his book.

Adom Yarjanian, better known by his pen name Siamanto, was born on August 15, 1878 in Agn, on the Euphrates River. He lived there with his parents until the age 14. It is during these formative years that he showed talent in writing poetry and was endearingly nicknamed Siamanto. He ended up using the moniker for the rest of his life. Strangely enough, nowadays aspiring young Armenian poets are also sometimes affectionately called Siamanto.

The family moved to Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1891 where Adom continued his studies at the famed Berberian School. He graduated in 1896, during the massacres in the interior of the country. The slaughter, now referred to as the Hamidian Massacres, claimed the lives of 250,000 to 300,000 Armenians. Like many other Armenian intellectuals, Yarjanian also fled the country in fear of persecution.

Siamanto also seemed to have been driven by wanderlust. After finishing his studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris, he moved to Cairo, Zurich, and Geneva where he contributed to the "Troshag" journal, the organ of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party. He then returned to Constantinople where he became privy to eyewitness accounts of the atrocities against the Armenians in the southeast of the country. From 1909 to 1911 he lived in Watertown, Massachusetts as editor of the "Hairenik" daily. He published *Bloody News From My Friend* in 1910. He then traveled to the Caucasus before returning to Constantinople where he was arrested on the eve of April 24, 1915, along with other prominent Armenian literary and community leaders.

Siamanto did not appear to have been distracted by his wanderlust. It might even have helped to

boost his creative genius. Throughout his travels he always interacted with Armenian intellectuals and worked in Armenian institutions. He also left behind a rich literary legacy. Along with the other slain figures, Taniel Varoujan, Roupen Sevag, Krikor Zohrab and others, he helped raise Western Armenian literature to its apex following a long dormancy only to be cut short by the Genocide. He stands as one of the towering figures of that renaissance. He was 37-years-old when he was tortured to death a few months after his arrest.

The Dance

In a field of cinders where Armenian life was still dying,
a German woman, trying not to cry
told me the horror she witnessed:
"This thing I'm telling you about,
I saw with my own eyes,

Behind my window of hell
I clenched my teeth and watched the town of Bardez turn into a heap of ashes.
The corpses were piled high as trees,
and from the springs, from the streams and the road,
the blood was a stubborn murmur,
and still calls revenge in my ear.

Don't be afraid; I must tell you what I saw.
so people will understand
the crimes men do to men.
For two days, by the road to the graveyard …

Let the hearts of the world understand,
It was Sunday morning,
the first useless Sunday dawning on the corpses.
From dawn to dusk I had been in my room
with a stabbed woman —
my tears wetting her death —
when I heard from afar
a dark crowd standing in a vineyard
lashing twenty brides and singing filthy songs.

Leaving the half-dead girl on the straw mattress,
I went to the balcony of my window
and the crowd seemed to thicken like a clump of trees
An animal of a man shouted, "You must dance,
dance when our drum beats."
With fury whips crackedon the flesh of these women.
Hand in hand the brides began their circle dance.
Now, I envied my wounded neighbor
because with a calm snore she cursed
the universe and gave up her soul to the stars …

"Dance," they raved,
"dance till you die, infidel beauties
With your flapping tits, dance!
Smile for us. You're abandoned now,
you're naked slaves,
so dance like a bunch of fuckin' sluts.
We're hot for your dead bodies.
Twenty graceful brides collapsed.
"Get up," the crowed screamed,
brandishing their swords.

Then someone brought a jug of kerosene.
Human justice, I spit in your face.
The brides were anointed.
"Dance," they thundered —
"here's a fragrance you can't get in Arabia."
With a torch, they set the naked brides on fire.
And the charred bodies rolled and tumbled to their deaths …

I slammed my shutters,
sat down next to my dead girl
and asked: "How can I dig out my eyes?"

Translated by Peter Balakian and Nevart Yaghlian