

Dante in the Armenian World

The cultural prestige which the *Academia Sancti Lazari* had earned in early 19th century and the contribution to the spiritual progress of the Armenian nation by the work of the Mekhitarist Fathers are well-established. Thanks to them, Armenians have been given access to and are able to read in their own language not only anthologies but even entire texts by authors such as Homer, Sophocles, Demosthenes, Euripedes, Plato, Virgil, Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Tasso, Metastasio, Alfieri, Foscolo, Manzoni, Leopardi, Collodi, De Amicis, Giacosa, Aganoor, Negri, Papini, Lamartine, Bossuet, Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Fénelon and so on. So it is not surprising that there has been no lack of interest in the ultimate masterpiece of Italian poetry, Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. Indeed, as a result of the tireless efforts of the Mekhitarist Fathers and their students, Armenians were introduced to Dante's work before many Asian peoples and even some European ones, through a great literary mind like Father Arsên Bagratuni. He used the traditional ancient Armenian language of Grabar, with the solemn, sophisticated style that distinguishes the Mekhitarist school.

It is rare for a work of genius to receive an equivalent translation or one that adequately expresses its meanings, rhythms, and stylemes. Before being able to arrive at a translation that verges on perfection, the same work is often reworked over decades by a number of different experts. During the second half of the 19th century, following in the wake of Bagratuni, various scholars tried their hand at translating the *Commedia* into Grabar. Different interpretations of the same episode appeared, usually in verse, some of which are rhymed but along with others in prose. This phase has been dubbed the "period of Grabar translations" done by Mekhitarist Fathers Arsên Bagratuni (before 1866), Edward Hiwrmwz (1866), Srapion Hek'imean (1866), Yarus'iwon Esayean (1869), Samuêl Gant'arean (1871), Davit' Nazaret'ean (1871) and Ghewond Ališan (1855, 1881).

At the beginning of the 20th century, between 1899 and 1930, translations into Ashkharhabar predominated by Father Garegin Zarbhanalean (1874), Avetik' M. Ezek'ean-Proyeants'(1880), Father Arsên Ghazikean (1899), Hrant Alatin (1912), Father Aristakês K'asgantilean (1927), Father At'anas Tiroyea (1930), Vagharšak Norents'(1930), Arbutan Tayan (1938), Hrach' K'ajarents'(before 1966), Soghomon Taronts'i (1966) and Ruben Ghulyan (1985). It was in this period that the *Commedia* was completely rendered into Armenian.

Dante's translations have enriched Armenian poetic language and have enlarged the confines of its linguistic and stylistic possibilities. Famous Armenian poets (like Ch'arents' and Širaz, for example) have borrowed some poetical forms and styles from Dante's poem, developing them in accordance with their national spirit. Thanks to the translations and the need to transmit the proper message to the reader, in addition to theological vocabulary, many compound words characteristic of Medieval or Western Armenian literature entered into circulation as well as neologisms, idiomatic expressions and some dialectal words.

All the partial translations, except in the one by Tiroyea, include the cantos of *Inferno*. Undoubtedly, the Mekhitarists had extraordinary taste in choosing which pieces to translate. But there is another reason why the verses of the *Inferno* are the most popular, partial translations to appear in Armenian: it is because Armenians find a personal reflection of their suffering especially in the *Inferno*.

The translators took into consideration the various levels of interpretation of the *Commedia*. Some translated it into rhyming poetry, others into prose, believing that it is impossible to render it into Armenian using "terza rima". The latter, following the philosophy of Saint Jerome - *non verbum de verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*- have privileged the word over the form.