

On the Importance of Translation *By Marc Aram Mamigonian*

Journal of Armenian Studies, Vol. VII, No. 1, Fall-Winter 2002-03

“What is translation? On a platter
A poet’s pale and glaring head,
A parrot’s screech, a monkey’s chatter,
And profanation of the dead.”

(Vladimir Nabokov, from stanzas written in imitation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* meter and rhyme, *Eugene Onegin*, vol I, 1964, p. 9).

Please consider this a call to arms. Of the many failures of the Armenian world (broadly understood) in the past century one has been the almost complete failure to make available to an English reading public the literature of Armenia. I realize full well that there are other important problems facing Armenians in the Diaspora and in the Republic: Genocide recognition, political corruption, factionalization, starvation, decaying infrastructure, blockades, and all the rest. Literature would seem to be a low priority — is a low priority. What a pity.

If one opens a copy of Prof. Kevork Bardakjian’s impressive *Bibliography of Modern Armenian Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000) it is hard not to be struck by the fact that so little of Armenia’s literature is accessible to those who do not read Armenian. Armenians, even those who do not have a good command of the language (such as this writer) like to boast of the richness of Armenian literature – a literature of which most have no direct knowledge. Armenians feel slighted when the great cultures of the world are mentioned and ours is not included. But what have we done to make that culture – specifically its literature, for it is through literature that many people first come to experience a culture – available to the world? Very little.

The world is not going to wake up one morning and realize that it is time to learn the Armenian alphabet, take up the study of the language, and

experience Armenian literature. (This should not be interpreted as a polemic *against* learning Armenian and experiencing the literature first hand. It is merely an exercise in realism.) If the world is to experience Armenian literature, then Armenian literature has to be brought to the world in a form it can digest. Not many in America can read Russian, for example, but millions have experienced Russian literature because of the efforts of Constance Garnett, the Maudes, and all the others who have labored to translate Russian masterpieces into English in the last century or more. True, one can argue that all such translations are flawed and no substitute for the original. This point is conceded. But to suggest that reading Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Lermontov, and Pushkin in translation is not a rewarding experience is to deny the obvious.

Perhaps, having criticized Armenians for not making their literature available in English, one should offer a tip of the hat to those who have tried to do so. Without pretending that this list is comprehensive, we owe a debt of gratitude to: Alice Stone Blackwell, Aram Tolegian, Diana Der Hovanessian, Marzbed Margossian, Zabelle Boyajian, S. Ashjian, Mischa Kudian, Leo Hamalian, Jack Antreassian, Peter Balakian, James Russell, Peter Cowe, Ara Baliozian, and others. The work of all of these translators can be (and is) criticized for its flaws, but they are owed a debt of gratitude that can never be reflected in book sales or royalties. Armenian historiography is on much more solid ground in the translation department. Thanks to the yeoman services of Robert Thomson and others in the past four decades, most of the important historical works of Armenia's Golden Age and beyond (Khorenatsi, Elishē, Agathangelos, Pawstos, etc.) have been translated with scholarly commentary. This is no small achievement. Thomson alone, the first holder of a chair in Armenian Studies in the United States, has produced a shelf full of translations. (It must be remembered, of course, that these works of history are also – perhaps preeminently – works of literature.) Unfortunately, instead of universal praise, Thomson has frequently been on the receiving end of vitriolic attacks for daring to posit that Khorenatsi may not have written his *History* in the fifth century. So,

when one hears that translating is a thankless business, this is sometimes an understatement.

Those who criticize the efforts of translators, as well as the would-be translators themselves, typically trot out the old saw: “You cannot capture the spirit of the Armenian language in English.” Perhaps this is true. For Armenian substitute French, Italian, Russian, Persian, Japanese, Greek, *ad infinitum*. But one can produce readable, literal translations that forewarn the reader of what they are missing. Vladimir Nabokov, one of the preeminent stylists of English in the 20th century (who constantly lamented that his English was labored compared to his native language Russian), translated Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and accompanied it with a massive volume of commentary that belabored the point that the English-language reader can never capture the majesty of the original Russian. Fair enough, perhaps: but at least we have his translation.

In addition, he has some wisdom to offer on the art of translating: I have always been amused by the stereotyped compliment that a reviewer pays the author of a ‘new translation.’ He says: ‘It reads smoothly.’ In other words, the hack who has never read the original, and does not know its language, praises an imitation as readable because easy platitudes have replaced in it the intricacies of which he is unaware. ‘Readable,’ indeed! ... [I]t is when the translator sets out to render the ‘spirit,’ and not the mere sense of the text, that he begins to traduce his author (Foreword, *Eugene Onegin*, vol I, 1964, p. ix).

Personally, I would agree with Nabokov that what is wanted is rigid adherence to the text rather than fanciful approximations of the original. Of course, it should still be “readable” (even though Nabokov disparages that word), or else no one will read it.

Who should be translated? Naturally not every Armenian writer merits the effort involved in translation to English. Opinions will vary on who the Armenian Tolstoys, Dostoevskys, and Pushkins are. The following twenty authors, all of whom wrote after 1850 (excepting Sayat Nova), are offered for consideration. (I am well aware that many such lists

could be offered and that this one is neither definitive nor authoritative.)

Khachatur Abovian	Yervand Odian
Arp‘iar Arp‘iarian	Hakob Paronian
Aksel Bakunts	Mkrtich Peshiktashlian
Elishē	Charents Raffi
Derenik Demirčyan	Sayat Nova
Petros Durian	Siamanto
Zapel Esayan	Širvanzade
Hamasteł Garegin	Srvanzeants
Matteos Mamurian	Gabriel Sundukian
Misak Metzarents	Daniel Varužan

That is a pretty substantial (if idiosyncratic) list, in my opinion, and it represents only a tiny fraction of modern Armenian literature.

If one concedes that translation is an exceedingly tricky business and that the translation itself can only ever serve as a poor substitute for the original, still one must recognize that the rewards are enormous. One need not be a student of literature to acknowledge that in some sense a nation lives in its literature. Walt Whitman wrote of *Leaves of Grass*, “Who touches this book touches a man” – but understand also (and this was Whitman’s wish) “Who touches this book touches a nation.”

Furthermore, for those who fear that making the great works of Armenian literature available in English will discourage potential readers to learn Armenian, I would say that the opposite is the case. Exposing non-Armenian readers to Armenian literature in English will only serve to stimulate reading it in the original. Exposure to this literature – and, of course, working hard to get it included in World Literature, Comparative Literature, and Multicultural Studies courses in high schools and colleges – will help conquer the still-staggering ignorance of Armenia and Armenian issues in the non-Armenian world. Having said all of this, it must be admitted that there are two major

impediments. First, there must be qualified people to do the work. This is not a major impediment: there are such people, and some of them are already doing the work. Second, however, there is the eternal money question: Who's willing to underwrite this project? Translation is time-consuming and difficult. The financial rewards are few. As much as I believe there is an audience for these works in English, I would not want to imply that there is a fortune to be made. Some person or persons have to be willing to fund an Armenian Translations Series and be willing to spend a lot to make back a little. The rewards are to be found outside of the bankbook.