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**Dante's Introduction into Turkey and His Influence until 1928\***

Dante's introduction into Turkey coincides with the Westernization / modernization efforts that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a time when new literary genres appeared in the country with the importation of European literature through translations alongside the traditional Turkish literature. The press, in particular, assumed a significant role in the promotion of the literary works and Europeans in Turkey . Within that framework, French novels, short stories, and poems were translated first, as the Ottoman State of the period was under the influence of France . Therefore, people became acquainted with the Italian poet Dante first through translations from the French language. Dante's first appearance in the Ottoman press dates back to 1884. In an article published in *Envar-i Zeka*(The Lights of Intelligence), it is written that poets who gathered around the grave of Dante discussed for a long time what to write down as an epitaph, but finally agreed on describing him with a single word: Dante! [1] After this, some articles on Dante were published, though infrequently, until the Constitutional regime was established in the Ottoman State (July 1908) and press censorship was relaxed. In a book on the History of Italian Literature (1913), which came out after a change in regime, translations of Dante's poems were published first. [2] Additionally, Abdullah Cevdet, known as the founder of the Westernization movement among the Ottoman intelligentsia, published a brief sample translation of Inferno's fifth canto in his own journal *İçtihad* (Opinion). [3]

The Ottoman State , which, after its occupation following World War I (1918), had fought its war for independence, was abolished in 1922 and replaced by the Republic of Turkey (1923). During this five-year period, Dante became a subject in the Turkish press and literary circles from various aspects. One of the most important occasions was when *Inci* (The Pearl), a journal addressing women, devoted a special section to Dante. Presenting Dante on the full cover page, *Incigave* its readers detailed information about the poet. In Cevad Gültekin's article titled "Dante Alighieri," a long piece of biographical information is followed by the opinions of several Western writers of Dante, and some quotations made from *La Divina Commedia* and *La Vita Nuova* . Some photographs are used as visuals: "The Founder of the Dante Society, Luigi Guelpa," "The Head Office of the Dante Society in Trieste " and "Three Members of the Dante Society." [4] One of the most influential intellectuals of both the fight for independence and the Republic, Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu, gave one of his articles published in the leading intellectual and cultural journal of the period, *Yeni Mecmua* (New Journal) the title "The Soul at the Purgatorio." In this article, an old, wise man addresses the Turkish youth of the time, makes quotations from Dante, saying "Listen to what the Florentine poet is telling," and makes the following observation: "You are, too, like the souls Dante is describing. Neither Paradiso, nor Inferno accepts you." [5] This article, and consequently Dante, constitute the start of a polemic. One of the most popular intellectuals and literati of the Republican Era, Musa Cevad Sakir Kabaagaçlı, who was later known as Halikarnas Balıkcısı (The Fisher Man of Halikarnassos), expressed some very severe and harsh criticism of the article "The Soul at the Purgatorio." Focusing especially on the translations by Yakup Kadri, he claims that they are "totally made up." Having been married to an Italian in his youth, and having stayed in Italy for a long time, Cevad Sakir translated Dante from the original text into Turkish for the first time, displaying his competence in and mastery of Italian in this article. He delivers the text in question at the beginning of his article – in Roman letters, whereas the Arabic alphabet was still

in use during that period.

Caccianli i ciel per non esser men belli  
Né lo profondo inferno li riceve  
Ch'alcuna gloria i rei avrebber d'elli.

Cevad Sakir translated and interpreted these and several other lines. [6] The same author also introduced a prose version of *La Divina Commedia* to Turkish readers in 1927 under the pseudonym Sina, in serial form. The serial, appearing in three issues, was later republished in one of the leading periodicals, *Resimli Ay* (The Illustrated Monthly). In the first one of the articles supported with rich visual material, Cevad Sakir describes Dante, with words placed beneath the title, as “The Greatest and Only Genius The World Has Raised”: [7] “European civilization has created many startling wonders, and miracles that erased the concepts of time and space, but it could just not raise another Dante.” In this first article Cevad Sakir describes *Inferno*. The second addresses both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, and has the title “How Does Dante Describe Inferno and Purgatorio?” In this article the author says: “Both prophets and holy books have described Hell, but it could be argued that no prophet has been able to describe the reality as strongly as Dante. When we read Dante's *Inferno*, what a shaking, freezing, ecstatic pleasure we experience!..” [8] Finally, under the title “Dante's Paradiso,” Cevad Sakir expresses his views as follows: “This immortal poet, who has described Hell in a language superior to and more masterful than anyone else's, has given life to Heaven with the same competence. Heaven is such a concept that the genius needed to describe this unknown world has to create it from scratch.” [9]

These detailed articles by Cevad Sakir were very influential in Turkish cultural circles, and a separate booklet of fourteen pages on Dante was published for the first time. [10] Lastly, before the Republic of Turkey abolished the Arabic letters and adopted the Latin alphabet, the poet Mehmet Emin Yurdakul published a booklet called *Dante'ye* (To Dante) consisting of twelve pages. Known for his Turkish identity, in his work the poet pours out his grief to Dante about the disasters Turks have gone through, and the role and insensitivity of the Western world in these disasters: “Oh poet! Oh great minstrel, who curses the unfair and evil on earth with the sounds of justice and revenge of his instrument! Oh the great son of the Earth, whose sparkling star of his genius pierces the mystery of the darkness!” After these expressions of praise comes this striking observation: “I know for sure Dante, that you do not only belong to Italy, or those who believe in Jesus. You belong to all countries, all people.” [11]

This remarkable statement summarizes perhaps in the most obvious way how Dante was known and perceived in Turkey.

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\* 1928 is the year Turkey adopted the Roman alphabet. This article only examines the pre-1928 period when the Arabic alphabet was in use.

[1] Oguz Karakartal, “Büyük İtalyan Sairi Dante'nin Türkiye'de Tanınması” (The Introduction of the Great Italian Poet Dante into Turkey), **Tarih ve Toplum (History and Society)** N:155 (November 1996), p. 34, *quoting from* (Mustafa Resid), “Dante,” **Envar-i Zeka (Lights of Intelligence)**, No. 15 (1884), p. 408.

[2] **İtalyan Tarih-i Edebiyatı (History of Italian Literature)**, İstanbul (1329/1913), pp. 17-34.

- [3] Dante Alighieri “Cehennem'den Besinci Terennüm” (Fifth Chapter of Inferno), **İçtihad (Opinion)**, N:68 (30 May 1329/13 June 1913), pp. 531-532.
- [4] Cevad Gültekin: “Avrupa'da: Dante Alighieri” (In Europe: Dante Alighieri), **İnci**, N:24 (1 Kanun-i Sani 1337/1 January 1921), pp. 5-7.
- [5] Yakup Kadri [Karaosmanoglu], “Araf'taki Ruh” (The Soul at the Purgatorio), **Yeni Mecmua (New Journal)** , N:2 (15 Kanun-i Sani 1339/15 December 1923), pp. 21-22.
- [6] Musa Cevad (Sakir), “Edebiyatta Gözboyayıcılık” (Deceit in Literature), **Yeni İnci (New Pearl)**, N:7 (February 1339/1923), p. 16. The version of Dante's lines printed here approximated the original and read as follows: “ Cacciarle i ciel per non eser men belli / Ne ló profunda inferno gli riceve / Che alcuna gloria i rei avrebber d'elli” ( *Inferno* 3, 40-42).
- [7] Sina (Cevad Sakir) “Dünyanın Bir Defa Yetisirdirdigi En Büyük Deha” (The Greatest and Only Genius The World Has Raised), **Resimli Ay (Illustrated Monthly)**, N:42 (August 1927), pp. 29-32.
- [8] Sina (Cevad Sakir) “Dante Cehennem'i ve A'raf'i Nasıl Anlatıyor?” (How Does Dante Describe Inferno and Purgatorio), **Resimli Ay**, N:43 (September 1927), pp. 8-11 and p. 40.
- [9] Sina (Cevad Sakir) “Dante'nin Cennet'i” (Dante's Paradiso) **Resimli Ay**, N:44 (October 1927), pp. 29-31.
- [10] Ibrahim Alaaddin, **Dante**. Istanbul: Sedat Matbbasi (1927).
- [11] Mehmed Emin [Yurdakul], **Dante'ye (To Dante)**, Istanbul: Ahmed Ihsan Matbaasi (1928), pp. 3-4.