

### A Profitable and Excellent Poem by Catholicos Grigor Tlay

Grigor Pahlavuni, dubbed "Tlay" (1133-1193) was a poet and Catholicos (1173-1193). He was the nephew of Catholicos Grigor III (1113-1166) and of St. Nersēs Šnorhali (1166-1173). His father was Prince Vasil Pahlavuni. Grigor has not been highly estimated as a poet and the poetic eminence of his uncle, the renowned St. Nersēs Šnorhali, overshadowed him. Recently, however, Th.M. van Lint wrote a study of his best-known poem, *Lament over the Capture of Jerusalem*, and has gone a considerable way to cast fresh light on his poetic production. Van Lint gives a good deal of information of both biographical and literary character about this poet-Catholicos.<sup>1</sup>

The poem translated here is an expression of personal religious sentiment. Grigor knows and recognizes the potential for spiritual perfection within himself but finds that that potential has weakened, darkened, is asleep. The first nine of the poem's twelve stanzas express his sense of spiritual impotence in a series of images, growing in intensity. Each line is formed of two hemistichs, one expressing a positive sentiment and the second a negative one. In the first four stanzas, the negative counterpart is formulated impersonally, but from stanza five on, the first person is introduced, "He commanded me for good, But I did not perceive it". In stanza 8 he speaks of his sinfulness and in the next he expresses powerful fear of Divine judgement. A climactic effect is thus achieved, with the turning point in stanza 10 "But He gave hope for sins ...". From this stanza 10, the poet faces towards hope for God's mercy and Christ's forgiveness of sin. The conclusion is somewhat anti-climactic, as if the poet's passion was exhausted by his sense of inadequacy.

Stanzas 1-4 deal with the poet's own qualities and characteristics, and how he is disappointed in them, and then with things outside himself to which he cannot respond, though they summon him. In stanzas 5-6 God's demand and call through both punishment and the offer of the good are set forth. Because he cannot respond to them on his own, these constitute yet another aspect of his soul's sterility. He attributes this to Satan's deception and his consequent sin and punishment (stanzas 7-9). The first part of the poem strongly presents the poet's own sense of spiritual aridity and his incapability to respond to God's summons. As he is, by implication, so are all humans. The resolution of the great tension thus created is Christ's forgiveness and this is the message of the last three stanzas. On his own, the poet cannot respond to God and His summons, only Christ's forgiveness can bring him to the light. The triple repetition of the stem թողո՞ւմ in the last stanza drives this point home: "Jesus will forgive (թողո՞ւ) many things."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Th.M. van Lint, "The Poem of Lamentation over the Capture of Jerusalem written in 1189 by Grigor Tlay, Catholicos of All Armenians," *The Armenians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land* eds. M. E. Stone, R. R. Ervine and N. Stone (Leuven, Peeters: 2002), 121-142.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to my friend Theo van Lint for much of the analysis in this paragraph.



Grigor uses a number of techniques to reinforce the overall movement of his composition. Thus we find a pattern of repetitive words at the end of the stichs. This is sustained in stanzas 1-5 as *ē* "is"; in stanzas 5-6, 10-11 line 1 as *zayn* "that"; in stanza 7 as the indefinite pronoun (*ok'* in line 1 and *inč'* in line 2); and as *na* "he" in stanza 11, line 2 and stanza 12. Stanzas 7 and 8 break the pattern.

These repetitions, even if not completely consistently used, give the poem a cohesiveness and perhaps the disruption of the pattern in stanzas 7 and 8 strengthens this effect by deliberate contrast. That cohesiveness is enhanced by the pattern of stress. The caesura between the hemistichs is strict throughout, preceding the fifth syllable from the end of the line. Thus the second hemistich has five syllables and is also marked out by the repetitive final word. The first hemistich of each line is also usually of 5 syllables, but in some cases is 6 or even 7 syllables long. This combines with the repetitive words to produce a first hemistich contrasting in content, sound and length with the stressed second hemistich which gains strength from its stressed regularity. Though the imagery is varied, the import is identical. The reader's interest is sustained by the technical means which captivate the ear and strengthen the interesting contrasts of imagery.

It is this setting off of the second hemistich that expresses the point of each of the images used. The range of the images is rich and complements the pattern set by the formal aspects of this meditation. The overall effect is very pleasing.<sup>3</sup>

ՏԵԱՌՆ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԻՍԻ ՈՐԴՈՅ ՎԱՍԻԼ ԻՇԽԱՆԻ՝ ԵՂԲՕՐ  
ԿԱԹՈՂԻԿՈՍԱՅՆ ՏԵԱՌՆ ԳՐԻԳՈՐԻՍԻ ԵՒ ՆԵՐՍԻՍԻ,  
ԱՍԱՑԵԱԼ ԲԱՆ ՊԻՏԱՆԻ ԵՒ ԶԱՐՄԱՆԱԼԻ

Գոյ յիս գիտութիւն,  
Բայց խամրացեալ է.  
Գոյ երկիւղ բարեաց,  
Այլ շիջանի միշտ:

Է՛ յիս եւ հոգի  
Բայց տկարացեալ է.  
Ունիմ եւ լոյս պայծառ,  
Բայց խաւարեալ է:

Կայ եւ հուր սիրոյ,  
Բայց սառուցեալ է.  
Եւ հողմըն քաղցրասի՛գ,  
Խորշակահար է:

Ջերմ եմ առ Աստուած,  
Այլ ցուրտըն մերձ է.  
Կամիմ բուսուցանել,  
Բայց տօթըն չար է:

<sup>3</sup> The text is drawn from Գրիգոր Տղայ. Բանաստեղծություններ եւ պոեմներ. աշխատությունը Ա.Շ. Մնացականյան, Երեւան 1972, էջ 179-181.

Խոստացաւ ինձ չարչարանք  
Եւ չընկալայ զայն.  
Ասաց եւ հեշտութիւն,  
Այլ չկամեցայ զայն:

Ի հնգից զիս բաժանեաց,  
Եւ չիմացայ զայն.  
Հրաւեր ետ եւ բարեաց,  
Բայց չըզգացի զայն:

Ի սնոտիս այս խաբեցայ  
Որպէս տըկար ոք.  
Ի յունայնս այս պատրեցայ  
Իբր ի կայուն ինչ:

Զաչըս կափուցի  
Եւ այն կամաւ իմ.  
Ի քուն մտի մեղաց  
Եւ հեշտացայ յայն:

Վա՛յ, երբ զարթնուցում  
Եւ հատուցէ ինձ՝  
Խաւար եւ տարտարոս,  
Դառն սարսափումն:

Բայց յոյս ետ մեղանաց,  
Եւ ես գտի զայն.  
Ատե՛ւ, ասաց, զյանցանս,  
Եւ գովեցի զայն:

Բարի եւ զողորմելն  
Եւ կատարեաց զայն.  
Սիրելն անճառ բարի,  
Եւ զայն ուսոյց նա:

Ի թողուլ պարտապանին՝  
Եթող եւ մեզ նա.  
Թողցէ Յիսուս բազմաց,  
Զոր պահանջեաց նա:

A Profitable and Excellent Discourse by Lord Grigor, son of Prince Vasil, brother of the  
Catholicoses Reverend Grigoris and Reverend Nersēs.

There exists knowledge in me,  
But it has withered;  
There exists awe of good things,  
Yet 'tis ever extinguished.



There is a soul<sup>4</sup> in me too,  
 But it is enfeebled;  
 I contain brilliant light,  
 But it is darkened.

There is love's fire too,  
 But it has grown cold;  
 And the sweet-wafting wind,  
 Is smitten by heat.

I am warm towards God,  
 Yet the cold is close by;  
 I wish to sprout forth,  
 But the heat is wicked.

He proffered me torment,  
 And I did not accept it.  
 He said delight too,  
 Yet I did not want it.<sup>5</sup>

From the five he split me,<sup>6</sup>  
 And I did not understand it.  
 He invited me to good,  
 But I did not perceive it.

I was deceived in this nonsense,  
 Like a weak man;  
 I was duped in this nothingness,<sup>7</sup>  
 As if in something real.<sup>8</sup>

I closed my eyes,  
 And that by my own will;  
 I entered sin's sleep,  
 And I enjoyed it.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Or: spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Reward and punishment were revealed to the poet, but he did not accept them as a guide for action.

<sup>6</sup> i.e., the five senses, the sensory world in contrast to the intelligible or the spiritual one. God gave the poet the ability to transcend the world of the senses and he did not realize what had been offered to him.

<sup>7</sup> Nonsense and nothingness are this world. The language evokes the serpent's deception of Adam who is doubtless the "weak man". This world is vanity and nothingness, a sentiment drawn from Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> Literally: stable.

<sup>9</sup> The poet continues to blame his lack of perception. The image of sleep to designate the unenlightened state is ancient and widespread.

Alas, when I shall be wakened,  
And he will recompense me;  
Dark and Tartarus,  
Bitter terror.

But he gave hope for sins,  
And I found that;  
Hate transgression, he said,  
And I praised that.

Good and merciful,  
And he carried that out;  
Loving ineffable good,  
That too he taught.

In forgiving the culprit,<sup>10</sup>  
He forgave us as well.  
Jesus will forgive many things  
Which He required.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Armenian expression is drawn from the Lord's Prayer, եւ մեր թողումք մերոց պարտապանաց  
"we forgive those who trespass against us."

<sup>11</sup> For which he would otherwise have demanded punishment.