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**A THOROUGHLY GEORGIAN MEDEA?:
CLASSICAL MOTIFS IN OTAR CHILADZE'S
*A MAN WENT DOWN THE ROAD***

Otar Chiladze's first novel, *A Man Went down the Road*, was published in Georgian, in 1973.¹ The novel is based, loosely, on the story of the *Argonautica*, the tale of Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece. The opening lines of the novel state that it is a story about the time when the first Greek set foot on the territory of Vani, the capital of ancient Colchis, and humbly asked for asylum. The story follows the fate of Colchis after the inhabitants of Vani fatefully accept the asylum seeker, Phrixus.

One of the earliest reviewers of the novel in the Soviet Press, A. Bestiavashvili, noted that while the novel is based on the story of the *Argonautica*, it is also full of Georgian folk elements. She predicted that it would become an object of controversy, which it did: subsequent Soviet critics became embroiled in questions such as: does it represent reality, is it mythology, or is it an attempt to create an anti-mythology, deconstructing the old myths, recreating new ones to replace them – an exercise in "myfotvorchestvo"? They wondered why the classical figures of Jason and Medea disappear at the end of Part I, at p. 140 of a 600 page novel; and why the author would make the figure, Farnaaz, by novel's end the main character, such an anti-hero – after all, Greek heroes never partake of his cowardly, dreamy character, or as one Soviet critic deemed it, his "moral deficiency, and social-political inferiority". ["*navstvennaia nedostatochnost'*, *sots'ial'no-politicheskaia nepol-*

¹ Chiladze Otar, *კზახე ერთი კაცო მიდითდა*, მერანი, თბილისი, 1973.

ნოს'ენოსთ'ია"² I would like to take up the two threads suggested by Bestiavashvili that later Soviet critics did not take into full consideration:

1) That the text is above all a Georgian novel, written in Georgian at a time when other writers from the Caucasus had elected to write in Russian.³ Otar Chiladze, however, chose to write in Georgian, and to have his work translated into Russian. The contrast between the two versions offers insight into his novel, and helps identify and provide a sense of the Georgian national character that Chiladze manages to create and preserve in his work.

Rather than being Classical in the Homeric sense, or in the tradition of Athenian

Tragedy, the text is rooted in Apollonius' *Argonautica*. As such, it resembles an extended Hellenistic poem, and presents in ways a reverse *Argonautica*. Farnaoz, the novel's hero, unlike Jason who travels from Greece to Colchis and back again, travels from Colchis to Crete and then returns home. The Hellenistic period of Greek literature flourished when the center of the Greek world had shifted from Athens, to Alexandria, Egypt, under the reign of the Ptolomies. It was an active and creative period in "classical" Greek literature. The authors whose works have been preserved, such as Apollonius of Rhodes, Theocritus, and Callimachus, were highly self-conscious artists, mixing genres, making allusions, altering canonical mythologies for aesthetic and creative purposes, focusing on the aesthetics of the text. It was also a period of humanizing the archaic, Homeric super heroes. In Apollonius' *Argonautica*, for example, Heracles is left behind at the beginning of the epic, and Jason emerges as a new hero: a weakling compared to Heracles, treacherous, and dependent on Medea for his ultimate success in obtaining the Golden Fleece.⁴ In Theocritus' cycle of bucolic poetry, you see the traditionally mighty Heracles desert his men to search for his lost lover, Hylas; or, Polyphemus, in Homer the picture of a lawless, man-eating Cyclops, transformed into a pathetic, lovelorn shepherd who finds his drug of choice, his medicine and solace, in singing poetry that is highly stylized and heavily laced with philosophy.⁵ The political implications of this kind of poetry are not difficult to see: in the welter of allusions to its own classical texts, in the imbedding of philo-

² See Greenberg I., "И жёрнов ещё не учился помолу", *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1980, 2, 43-45 and Nuikin A., "Взлёты и просчёты", *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1980, 2, 45-51, for some of the controversy surrounding Chiladze's novel.

³ In particular, I have in mind Bulat Okudzhava, who wrote about Georgia, but primarily in Russian.

⁴ References to The *Argonautica* are based on: Apollonius of Rhodes, *The Voyage of Argo*, trans. Rieu E.V., Penguin Books, 1975.

⁵ References to Theocritus' work are based on: *Theocritus*, trans. Gow, Andrew Sydenham Farrar, Cambridge University Press, 1973, 1950.

sophical buzz-words, as well as in its place as court poetry, it offered subdued, yet lively political commentary when more open criticism was not encouraged. It provided a fine vehicle for allegorical reading of characters who at the same time were very real and down to earth. I would like to suggest that Chiladze, in this novel, is quite conscious of this Hellenistic tradition, borrows from it, and plays with it on many levels.

In examining Chiladze's novel, I would like to start at the very beginning, in this case, with the preface. As I first began to read the text in Georgian, I noticed that the prefaces of the Russian and the Georgian texts vary to a remarkable degree. While a preface may be a small thing, it can, in some cases be as important as the epigraph to a poem or a longer piece of literature. Thus, I would like to point to a few lines, and comment that the Russian has to me, a quintessentially Soviet tone to it, hailing the good and hearty, emphasizing the striving towards progress, etc.⁶ It highlights the Classical Mythology, and overblown emotions of its characters – "full-blooded heroes, full of deep feelings, powerful emotions, lofty thoughts, vile intentions." But, it gives very little idea of what the novel is really about.

When I read the Georgian preface, I was caught by a preoccupation with the word, "xalxi", "ხალხი". This term gets translated as "narod," "the people," in Russian, but rather than having the familiar ring from the vocabulary of international communism, as in "druzhiba narodov", it here has a very different tonality. Although the novel is ostensibly about the "xalxi", "ხალხი" of ancient Colchis, the very repetition begs the question of what the term really means, in its own context, in Georgia; and indeed, the novel will do just that: explore what "xalxi" means, in all of its manifestations, ancient and modern.

The Russian preface also mentions little about the "dream and faith in the bright future". Rather, the Georgian preface tells us the novel is the story of the pain, "ტკივილი", or the happiness, "სიხარული" of the dream, "ოცნება" and faith "რწმენა", specifically, of the people of Colchis: the novel is in large part the story of the faith in a specifically Georgian character, and the pain of the destruction of the lands of Colchis at the hands, or feet, of invading peoples.

The Georgian preface also has precious little to do with ancient mythologies. Rather than playing off stereotypes of the threatening king and his daughter, Medea, it promises that we will see the traditional canon anew – "ახლებურად": before our eyes we will see the "source and the roots" of the

⁶ Please see my translation of both the Russian and the Georgian prefaces, which follow this article.

ancient, canonical myths. The text at once offers myths from a Georgian perspective, and claims, perhaps tongue in cheek, a veracity and primacy of these legends as they have sprung up on Georgian soil.

The preface also offers a more realistic picture of what is actually in the novel. There are three parts to it: Aeetes, Ukeiro, Farnaoz, a king, a warrior, and a bricklayer, and these are three faces of one people. We are told outright, that the main hero – not just a character, but hero (გმირი), and both terms, "personage" and "gmiri" are used, is the people, again, the "ხალხი". We get barely a whiff of the exaggerated emotions in the Russian version, and again, no mention of Jason or Medea. Finally, the Georgian has a lovely, complex sentence that boils down the real essence of the novel: if you can keep your humanity on the long road of life that is full of trouble, then your existence will be united with an eternal phenomenon – the people; again we see the term "ხალხი", and connecting with that people and maintaining your humanity is the real meaning of the novel. Chiladze both explores what it takes to maintain your humanity, and somehow equates the idea of Georgia with a cradle and/or a haven for humanity – which is not surprising from the country that beckons with its warmth and citrus plants, was a place of refuge for Pasternak and Mandelstam in the early years of the Soviet period, and others since that time.

Moving onward, the title deserves comment, as does Chiladze's style. The Georgian title is "gzaze erti katsi midioda" which literally translates as "On the Road, (or Path) One Man was Walking". A key word here is "erti", or "one". While the title in Russian, "Shol po doroge chelovek," makes an attempt to replicate the beginning of a fairy tale, as in "once upon a time a man was walking down the road", the Georgian has a specifically Georgian reference: it is part of a children's counting game, which anyone who grew up on the streets of Tbilisi, or Kutaisi, or Poti, would recognize: one man was walking down the street, how many? Two men were walking... Three...⁷

The extended meaning of the title also comes full circle at the end of the novel. We are given two instances of Farnaoz walking down the same road in Vani, at the beginning of his life, and at the end: we can presume, since he is the hero of the novel, that he has kept his humanity through his life of sorrow. This structure also gives the entire work a very neat, classical ring composition, a particular trait of the ancient Lyric poets, and which Chiladze uses more than once in the novel.

⁷ Information about this child's rhyme has come to me from Dr. Aida Abuashvili-Lominadze, my mentor in Georgian language and culture, in Seattle, Washington.

Thus, the title itself is marked by multi-valence: it can be translated into a rather neutral title in Russian or English, but for a Georgian reader it smacks of hometown, of childhood, of identity as a Georgian; it gives the philosophical meaning to the text; and it wraps the entire novel into a neat aesthetic bundle. It also gives a first clue to the overall polyphony of the text. As one Soviet critic has noted, a trademark of Chiladze's style is the use of montage: he will present a lyrical passage, next to a philosophical one, next to a humdrum domestic scene, with little connecting them, and yet they flow together almost seamlessly; and he will often weave many tones together in a single sentence.⁸

As mentioned earlier, the novel is based, loosely, on the story of the *Argonautica*, the story of Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece. But, as in a fractured fairy tale, the allusions to the main, canonical Greek Mythological characters are oblique, roles and characters are often inverted and redrawn. For example, in Apollonius' *Argonautica*, Jason loses one sandal in the mud, and when he appears before king Pelius with a single sandal, the king remembers an ancient prophecy that his ruin will follow upon the arrival of a man with one sandal, and so sets Jason the impossible task of retrieving the Golden Fleece. Chiladze has altered the story, and foregrounds Phrixus as the stranger who arrives in Vani with one sandal. There has been no specific prophecy, but, being the first Greek to wash ashore, he does eventually bring ruin to the ancient Colchidians.

Other, key figures are similarly not drawn to their canonical character, but become humanized. Aeetes, known for his ferocity, from Hesiod, to Euripides, and Apollonius, is more kind-hearted in Chiladze's novel as he welcomes in Phrixus, the young asylum seeker, and insists he be treated as one of his own children. He is further merciful when Jason lands on his territory unbidden. He should, as a wise leader, kill Jason and his crew outright, and thinks about doing this, but because of the law of hospitality, a deeply ingrained Georgian trait, and that Jason has brought back his four grandsons, spares them instead, and as a result, loses both his daughter and his kingdom. We get, for the first time that I'm aware of, a very warm and lively picture of Medea's sister, Karisa, who marries the Greek Phrixus. We see her outdoing her brothers in knavery (კეცქი), but having no interest in learning the traditional healing techniques from her aunt. We hear her laughter, and see how she bears the trials and tribulations of her inter-ethnic marriage: Phrixus suffers a severe case of nostalgia for his native land, usurps their sons' loyalty, and the four boys abandon their mother land – *დედა მიწა* – for Greece. We

⁸ See Bestavashvili, *passim*.

actually know much more about her than we do about Medea. And, rather than focusing on Medea's passion and treachery, Chiladze introduces her as an auxiliary character, an innocent, young girl gathering herbs in the meadows.⁹ She is the protégé of her older aunt, skilled in the ways of folk medicine. We see her as a young adolescent, who in a dream anticipates Jason's arrival and her own falling in love. She indeed boils up some magic herbs to help Jason retrieve the Golden Fleece, but again differs from, say, Apollonius' Medea in that she runs out of the necessary herbs, not that she had planned the treachery. And, as the first part of the novel ends, Medea sails off with Jason, and we hear nothing about her for the rest of the novel. And Aectes, rather than cursing his daughter and chasing after her, as he does in Apollonius, is further humanized, laments her fate, and wonders what she will do without her father to protect and help her. Apollonius' picture of Medea trembling before her enraged father, or Euripides' picture of Medea driven by jealousy to kill her children, are totally absent.

Other characters are drawn, however, and they become new mythological figures for the Georgian novel. One central, early figure is Bakha, the wine merchant. He is Bacchus, but with a Georgian twist. He is the owner of the tavern, forty steps down, who refuses to mix water with his wine, and prefers watching his customers and hearing their conversations to making an enormous profit. The description of his cellar is wonderful: the voices that mix under the vaulted roof form a polyphonic choir that rises and falls. In the wine that flows we see yet another folk element incorporated into the text: the wine is described flowing from a cask, or *kasri*, to a *koki*, from a *koki* to a *doki*, from a *doki* to a *jami*, from a *jami* to a stomach "stomaki" and then it pours its strength into arteries of the country. "გადადიოდა ღვინო კასრიდან კოკაში, კოკიდან დოქში, დოქიდან ჯამში, ჯამიდან კი სტომაკში..." This has the rhythm of a child's rhyme, similar to "The House that Jack Built", but Georgian: Who ate the grapes? A goat. Who ate the goat? A wolf. Who ate the wolf? A gun. Who ate the gun? Rust. Who ate the rust? The dirt, and so on. Chiladze's text includes the string of terms for specifically Georgian vessels for wine.¹⁰ The passage in question ends with a picture of Bakha sitting on his favorite stool, with his chin resting on his hands, which are rest-

⁹ Chiladze Otar, *Bednieri T'anjuli*, Logos Press 2003, 232-234. Chiladze comments that his goal in writing his version of Medea's story was not to repeat the Greek version that we know from Euripides, but to present Medea as a young, innocent girl just awakening to the treacheries of adult life.

¹⁰ See the Georgian reader: დედა ენა, თბილისი, 1912. This has been presented to me as a basic reader with well-known folk songs, stories, lore, including terms for traditional Georgian house wares.

ing on the top of his walking stick. His hands are crossed like roof tiles – the word recalls the term used for the roofs of Vani earlier in the novel; the walking stick is made from the "შინდო", dogwood, and with his arms he forms the shape of a traditional Georgian home, which was built around a central post (დედა ბოძი) – originally a live tree, and later a column or pillar: he is the keeper of the Georgian soul, life-blood and hearth. His hands are chapped and worn from the wind and the sun – he is likened to a pagan god in his temple – he is so obviously Bacchus, but so different from the Greek god, who more often than not is portrayed as a youthful, sensual figure, associated with wild maenads practicing their man-destroying rituals in the mountain tops.

The picture of the tavern as a kind of cave is also suggestive for its philosophical overtones: the stairs are the place where the darkness, dampness, and noise meet the blinding sunshine, which calls to mind an image of philosophical enlightenment – divine and human mingling on the stairs, and Bakha takes particular pride in this daily mixing of dampness, darkness, and blinding light.

Another of these characters is Bedia, both the elder of the local fishermen, and the "lord of the sea". He is described like Poseidon, standing with his triton on the bow of his fishing boat, but with excruciatingly real sweat and salt on his sun and wind burnt face, which not incidentally, are like Bakha's hands. His name actually means destiny, fate, (ბედი) and as he is the one to bear the responsibility for rescuing the first Greek, the young Phrixus; and recognizing a crumpled olive leaf the boy carries in his palm as a plea for asylum, he also, ironically, shares the responsibility for the destruction of his town: if he hadn't saved the boy, who was then welcomed in by Aetes, who knows what might have or not have happened.

Bacchus and Bedia are only two of several characters who get transformed into icons of Georgian culture, and which remain to be explored in far greater detail.¹¹ I would like at this point, and perhaps rather cursorily, to address some of the novel's contemporary political and social ramifications.

On a general level, we get a fair critique of tyrannical behavior: in the latter part of the novel we see Minos, the imperious king of Crete, and his henchmen, Kusa, the executioner, and Okadjado, the new king of Vani, who is cruel and not particularly bright. These figures caricature tyrants/evil political toadies, and as others have noted, Chiladze is merciless in portraying their dehumanized and dehumanizing behavior.¹² This criticism of tyrannical beha-

¹¹ My dissertation, in progress, will explore more of these characters in greater depth than is possible here.

¹² See Greenberg and Nuikin, *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1980, 2, 43-45, 45-51.

viator is also a point that, not incidentally, is repeatedly praised by most of the Soviet critics – they recognized common ground, if you will.

The entire issue of the colonizing Greeks invites an interesting parallel to the various peoples who have expanded their territorial claims into Georgia – Romans, Persians, Turks, Russians, and others.¹³ When Phrixus, the Greek boy, who is specifically called the first foreigner, is picked up by Bedia out at sea, and accepted into Colchis, we see the first instance of trouble: from this moment the sea makes up its mind to leave the city, which comes then to be situated in a swamp, as if the city had committed some grave sin. We see hints of treachery from the Greeks: We learn that Phrixus has been sent by the Greeks, and that the crumpled olive leaf he bears in his clenched hand had been planted with wicked cunning by the king. Posing as a prince, Phrixus is actually the son of poor pumpkin seed vendors who sell their children for hard cash. Thus, sent by Minos, he is the first in a string of colonizers and foreign controlled rulers. The significance this has for Georgia's history is perhaps too transparent to mention – the visitors who promise much but then bring sorrow and trouble in their wake.

Bakha's underground tavern is again significant. Chiladze offers his readers a marvelously self-deprecating, self-knowing simile: when the townsfolk are all gathered to talk about the rescued boy and ram, the country itself is likened to a frightened hare, afraid to emerge from its underground safety, trembling, as if sensing that the arrival of foreigners signals the loss of their city.

In the final and third section of the novel, there is an interesting echo of men in exile: Farnaaz is an unwanted character at home, so he is sent to Crete to ply his work as a master mason. One scene in particular is strikingly reminiscent of various accounts of prisoners working as forced laborers in the camps: Farnaaz is one of a thousand men, sweating to build Minos' new palace. Putting his heart into his work so the rhythm of the physical labor takes away more troubling thoughts, he is a brooding Tolstoyan figure, given to contemplating philosophical questions. He is a man in exile, and a stranger in his own land. The Russian term that is used for him, over and over again, is, as you might imagine: "lishnyi", "superfluous": although Georgian, he is tied to other heroes of the Caucasus, and is likewise a hero in his own time.

To conclude: In the third section Farnaaz emerges as the main hero, a new hero, if you will, the Jason of a reverse *Argonautica*. This returns the text to the other Hellenistic poets: Farnaaz, in many ways defeated by life, becomes

¹³ For an excellent history of Georgia in English, see Suny R. G., *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Indiana University Press in Association with Hoover Institute Press, Stanford University, Stanford, California, 1988.

a shepherd/philosopher, as he abandons a decrepit Vani to live in a goat's cave, drinking milk straight from the source. He desperately desires to return to the earlier, bucolic life in Vani, to the true love of his childhood – the goat whose milk he drinks had once belonged to his love's mother, and the cave was where he and his love had first run away to – and here he is bathetic, almost to the point of being ludicrous, and at the same time totally true to previous ideals and emotions.

The ending of the novel is rather bleak. The children of Vani, including Farnaoz's own beloved son, try to fly, and his son dies in the effort. The novel draws to a close with Farnaoz about to be hung for not raising his child well, but then switches gears unexpectedly, and in the finale Farnaoz, holding an invalid Ikarus, an ancient symbol of the desire for freedom, in his arms, has a vision of the return of the garden of Dariachangi, the garden of paradise that had been one of the defining features of Vani, but which had disappeared after the Greeks arrived, at the first sign of familial violence, when a father first struck his son. Rather than being a useless dreamer who suffers from "moral deficiency", Farnaoz is a dreamer with a purpose: to restore a vision of Colchis, that is closer to the true essence of its people, or what Chiladze would like to present as the true essence of its people, to restore the vision of Georgia as a haven that beckons and succors.

Preface to the Russian edition, 1985.

My translation:

In the novel *A Man Went down the Road*, by the well-known Georgian writer, laureate of the Shota Rustaveli Prize, Otar Chiladze resurrects the events of three-thousand years ago, concerning the history of the Colchidian kingdom, when the first Greek stepped on this land that has had blood poured down upon it. All of the characters – from the threatening tsar of the Colchidians, to his daughter Medea, from the stranger Phrixus, to the Greek Jason, who had sailed to the shores of Colchis after the Golden Fleece, – are living, full-blooded heroes, full of deep feelings, powerful passions, lofty thoughts, or vile intentions Otar Chiladze's work is a work about the dream and faith in the bright future of a people, about its striving towards peace and happiness, about the right of man to fulfillment: only honest, creative work can justify a man's existence on the earth.

Otar Chiladze's work is widely popular, both in our country, and abroad.

Preface to the Georgian edition, 1973.

My translation:

In Otar Chiladze's novel, *A Man went down the Road*, the story is told about ancient Colchis, and its people, about the pain or happiness of its people, and most importantly, the dream and hope of the people. With this, we have the experience of reading the myths anew: before our eyes the poetic cover of the myths falls away, we see beyond the traditionally canonical views and imaginings, we see the source, the foundation, the root of the myths.

The novel is made up of three parts: "Aeetes", "Ukeiro", and "Farnaos". At first glance, these parts seem as if they are independent books, but between them truly exists a visible, organic connection.

The main hero of the novel is the people, imagined, as a symbol of life. The three main characters are a king, a warrior, and a craftsman – they are three faces of the people seen from different angles.

If, on the road of life, that is full of danger, you can keep your humanity to the end, then your existence will be united with an eternal phenomenon, the people. This is the fundamental idea of the novel.