

Nana Tonia (Tbilisi)

## TIME AND POETESSES

(Sappho, Cassia, Marina Tsvetaeva)

*И долго на свете томилась она,  
Желанием чудным полна,  
И песен небес заменить не могли  
Ей скучные песни земли!<sup>1</sup>*

Марина Цветаева

Reading poetry is a challenge; it requires thinking. However, this is the thought that carries away, enchants and captures. The charm is exercised by word, subordinated to the authors' style, which, being unique with each great poet, attracts the reader with its charm and at the same time, puzzles, as it compels one to grasp the depth of a poetically phrased event or thought, difficult to imagine, or unimaginable at all. "Poetry is ever more charming as step by step you are carried away by the truth, difficult to discover", these words were written by Petrarch<sup>2</sup> as early as 5 centuries ago, and readers of poetry cannot help agreeing with them even nowadays. However, the ideas were not a novelty even in the times of Petrarch: the Neoplatonians sought the philosophical truth in the Homeric poetry, Ovid's works were regarded as the allegory of moral truths in the Middle Ages, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> "And in the world she languished for long,/filled with wondrous desire./and for her, the divine songs could not be replaced/by the dull songs of the earth."

And the years in the world could but sadden and tire  
The soul filled with wondrous desire.  
And vainly the dull songs of earth would have stilled  
The song wherewith heaven had thrilled.

<sup>2</sup> Петрарка Ф., Эстетические фрагменты, Москва 45.

Aristotle, who was among the first appreciators and commentators on poetry, noted in his *Poetics* that poetry imitates the so-called general, 'common', and thanks to this, stands over history, which relates about particular and individual stories.<sup>3</sup> This idea of Aristotle must have escaped the attention of the following authors of poetic theories as it was no earlier than the 15<sup>th</sup> century that Angelo Policiano attempted to comment on it, dwelling on the object of poetry proper. According to him, the object of poetry is exactly the 'general', the 'common', i. e. the humane in a human, the vegetative in vegetation, the elevated in love, the terrific in a crime. Hence, a poetic invention is not a form of the universal truth, but is the only means to approach the truth experienced, possessed by poetry itself, which is unattainable for other fields of art and scholarship. Consequently, the creator of poetic word has his/her own space where he abides having approached his own truth. The fourth dimension of the space is time, which becomes artistically visible in the poetic space. In his *Transcendental Aesthetics*, Kant considers time and space that is *chronos* and *topos*, as the indispensable forms of cognition determining the perfection of a work of art and its relationship to the reality. Therefore, the separation of a chronotope from the whole work is possible only based on an abstract analysis. Time and space are inseparable in art and literature and above all, they also are charged with an emotive import. However, abstract reasoning is capable of presenting time and space not only jointly, but severally as well, maintaining the emotive import.

The author's as well as the listener's/reader's chronotope is given in the text, which has its own place in space, while the creation and perception of the text proceeds in time. A text has a real author and a real reader/listener. They are in different time and space, sometimes separated by centuries. However, if viewed globally, they nevertheless belong to the same real world, which may or may not resemble the world presented in the text. A work of art and the fictional world it reflects influences the real world and this is the process of mutual influence, which in itself is chronotypical.<sup>4</sup>

All creatures have creators. The latter abide in their respective time and are free in the process of world perception. The following question may crop up in this regard: from which chronotope does he/she view the event he/she experienced and depicts? First of all, it should be mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotelles, *Poet.*, IX.

<sup>4</sup> Бахтин М., Вопросы литературы и эстетики, Москва 1975, 234.

that an artist belongs to the epoch he lives in, while the epoch covers not only his immediate present, but also the past; hence, an artist converses from the chronotope of the world perceived by him. However, the world the author projects, especially if she/she is a poet, will never be identical with his/her contemporary world, no matter how realistic and adequate it may appear. Naturally, a listener or a reader can imagine the author of the work listened or read by him; he can also refer to autobiographical and biographical notes, study the epoch the artist lived in and the materials about him/her, etc. However, it is only possible to reconstruct the author's artistic and historical image, which cannot be accurate, though it may precisely fit the research criteria applied in such cases. Anyway, if the author's image as projected by the reader more or less resembles his/her true image, it will help the reader get a better and more profound understanding of the work in question.

In this regard, I found especially interesting to study the poetic worlds of poetesses, and specifically their poetic perception of time. I have analyzed the works of three poetesses of different times and received almost the same picture: Sappho, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, was recognized the coryphaeus of lyric poetry already in ancient Greece. Her works survived in fragments. There are only two verses whose completeness raises no doubts among scholars. However, regardless of the success of the papyrological search, the ideas of the great ancient thinkers prevailing over 27 centuries will not change.

According to Strabo, "At the same time (i. e. the times of Alcues and Pittacus - N. T.) lived Sappho, this amazing creature (θαυμαστόν τι γρηῆμα) for all the following epochs. As historical sources mention, we do not know any other woman who could be her equal in poetry (poetic beauty) at least in the smallest degree. In those times, the city (Mytilene - N. T.) was ruled by many tyrants due to internal unrest."<sup>5</sup>

I believe, Strabo, the greatest geographer on ancient times, precisely defines the main conditions for the perpetuity of poetic works: a) a poet must be 'amazing' (θαυμαστόν) for all the following epochs; b) He/she must be original (ἐνάμιλλον οὐδὲ κατὰ μικρόν); c) His/her work must be distinguished by poetic beauty (ποίησεως χάριν).

As if incidentally, Strabo points out that in the times of Sappho and Alceus, Mytilene was ruled by many tyrants due to the internal unrest. What is implied in the sentence? In the times of Sappho and Alceus, Mytele, the capital of Lesbos, was overwhelmed by severe struggles

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<sup>5</sup> Strabo, XIII, 617.

between the aristocratic and democratic parties. These struggles are vividly reflected in Alceus' poems. As concerns Sappho, she seems to have never lived in the city troubled with 'internal unrest' and ruled by 'many tyrants'. Her life years coincide with the rule of the tyrant Pittacus, who had been elected *esimnete* with unlimited authority for 10 years. He mercilessly persecuted the aristocracy. According to the Parian Chronicle, Sappho fled Mytilene for Sicily. The poetess is believed to have been from a noble family and consequently she too must have incurred Pittacus' wrath. It is assumed that Sappho accompanied her husband into exile, who, being a Lesbian nobleman, must have taken part in the political struggle. Close to 590 BC Pittacus declared amnesty. According to Sappho's biographers, the poetess must have returned to Mytilene at the time.<sup>6</sup> None of Sappho's surviving verses reflect the political turmoil. It can be argued that Sappho's poetry is entirely apolitical, whereas political motifs are foregrounded in the works of almost all archaic great lyric poets (Anacreon, who belongs to a later period, invites a different appreciation). The Sapphic chronotope is not real, it was imaginery as the poet used to converse with her diety who frequently visited her in the most dramatic minutes of her life (fr. 1),<sup>7</sup> or during a celebration (fr. 2), etc. At any rate, Sappho did not recognize any boundary between the real and imaginary, material and heavenly worlds. She knew that the real time is transient. She argues in one of the fragments (fr. 90). "Time flows: (πάρρα δ' ἔρχετ' ὄρα). However, she also knew that her name was not doomed to oblivion and that she would be remembered in the future as well (fr. 147: μνάσσεσθαι πῶτα φαῖμ' ... χᾶψερον ἀμιέων). This was her unconscious belief, the belief which is inherent with all artists endowed with the divine gift. However, from the modern perspective, we try to understand and to analyze in what respect Sappho's poetry is contemporary. The conclusion drawn sounds as follows: Sappho's poetic world is not determined in terms of time and space. The general and the elevated is presented in this world with an amazing lightness, simplicity and poetic finesse. Their profundity appeals to the readers'/listener's emotions with the same power as 27 centuries ago, which determines their eternal contemporaneity. This real world in which Sappho and Alceus lived was a free world. No one forced them to declare in public their religious and political stands. Tradition and law

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<sup>6</sup> See: Tonia N., *Poetessen der Antike*, Tbilisi 2008, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Sappho, *Lyrik*, In *linguam Georgicam e Graeco convertit, prolegomenis et commentariis illustravit* Nana Tonia, Tbilisi 1977.

granted them full freedom to make choice, and no one infringed on their freedom. Despite this, Sappho was apolitical by her nature, while Alceus was the opposite – in his early literary works he firmly defended the interests and legitimacy of his clan. Time and space was boundless for Sappho. Already in ancient times he was regarded as the apologist of the most perpetual of perpetual problems. The Athenian philosopher and statesman Demetrisu (the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) noted in his writings that all of Sappho's works are fascinating as she sings to the garden of nymphs, to Eros, depicts the beauty of wedding,<sup>8</sup> Himerius, the renowned rhetor of the Roman period (the spiritual father of the Gregory of Nazianzus, the 4<sup>th</sup> century) preached that "Sappho was the only woman who had a sharp sensation of love at the tune of lyre. Therefore, she devoted all her songs to Aphrodite and Eros, and chose as a theme the beauty and charm of young virgins."<sup>9</sup>

A lot can be said about Sappho's life and artistic works, however, the most important points can be set forth as follows:

- a) Unlike other poets, Sappho felt best of all the spirit of the age and all the respective peripetia. However, she managed to see in the most ordinary and common things the beautiful and the lofty that abides beyond time and space.
- b) Beyond time and space was her imaginery world, "where there are colourful flowers and the haven pleasing to the eye," where gather the Charites and the crowned."<sup>10</sup>
- c) According to the poetess, who was the best among ancient or rather all European lyric poets, only love (literary – "the love of the sun") gives the power that enables the overcoming of time and space limits.

Antiquity was succeeded by the Middle Ages. Almost 15 centuries were to pass until a poetess resembling Sappho by her originality and poetic inspiration would appear in European literature. It was no earlier than the 9<sup>th</sup> century that a charming nun Cassia came on scene, whom the Holy Church recognized equal of the great creators of canons. Of her poetry survived a cycle of odes *A Canon for the Departed*, hymns and gnome<sup>1</sup>.

How was time interpreted in the Middle Ages? There were many theological disputes on the point. As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Holy Augustine

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<sup>8</sup> Demetrios, *II. έργα*. 131.

<sup>9</sup> Himerios, *Orationes*, 28, 7.

<sup>10</sup> The study of Cassia's works started with extensive research by the 19<sup>th</sup> century renowned Byzantinist, Karl Krumbacher. Since then, a number of scholarly works have been devoted to Cassia's poetry, including N. Tonia, *From Sappho to Cassia*, Tbilisi 1990.

directly posed a question in his *Confession*: “What is time?” and himself provided the answer: “Surely we understand it when we speak of it. But we cannot define precisely what time is. It is imperceptible.”<sup>11</sup> The people of the Middle Ages, the theologians thought that time is god’s and it does not belong to man; time is governed by God. The hagiographers never referred to the date of birth of a martyr, but mentioned the date of his/her death as it was the date of his/her communion with God. As concerns Cassia, neither the date of her birth nor the date of her death is known to us. However, we know how she responded to the Emperor Theophilus, who, enchanted by her beauty, approached her at the bride show and said: “Through a woman [came forth] the baser [things]” Cassia said: “And through a woman [came forth] the better [things]”. Theophilus rejected her boldness and chose another woman as the Empress. Cassia founded a convent where she was the abyss till the end of her life. In the convent she composed hymns and secular gnomes. None of her works reveals the feel of time, as if she did even take notice of the endless turmoil raging in the Emperors’ court. Her thoughts were directed only towards the eternal values as she knew perfectly well that “all wordly is transient and will turn into earth and ashes”, only God is ever-lasting (Hymn IV).

She devoted all her work and her life to the eternal, abiding beyond time and space. The Archebishop Philaret, who wrote a highly significant work about the hymns of the Greek Church, pointed out with rare precision the power of love that drove Cassia and made her the best poet of the Byzantine period.<sup>12</sup> The whole of Cassia’s poetry is a hymn for the salvation of human soul.

Another 10 centuries will pass and the great poetess of an completely different period will say: “Вся моя жизнь – роман с собственной душой”, мне ничего не нужно, кроме своей души!” Indeed, her tragic life attested to the truth of these words.

In her article called *Поэт и время (Poet and Time)*, published in 1932, Marina Tsvetaeva wrote: “Гений дает имя эпохе” (“Genius gives a name to an age”). And this was true. The philosopher N. Berdyaev described Tsvetaeva’s epoch in the following way:<sup>13</sup> “Это была одна из самых утонченных эпох в истории русской культуры... эпоха творческого подъема поэзии и

<sup>11</sup> Августин А., Исповедь, Москва 1991, 292.

<sup>12</sup> “Чтобы так верно выразить чувства возлюбившей много... необходимо было Кассии ощущать в душе своей полноту горького сокрушения о растлении души нашей, надобно было самой ей быть полною уповающей любви к Спасителю грешников...” Филарет, архиепископ Черниговский, Исторический обзор песнопевцев и песнопения Греческой Церкви, Чернигов 1864, 332.

<sup>13</sup> Бердяев Н. А., Самопознание, Москва 1991, 164.

философии после периода упадка, культурный ренессанс начала века. Вместе с тем, русскими душами овладели предчувствия надвигающихся катастроф. Поэты видели не только грядущие зори, но и что-то страшное, надвигающееся на Россию и мир.<sup>14</sup>

Marina Tsvetaeva's epoch, so accurately described by the philosopher, witnesses many a poet, about whom Tsvetaeva noted: "I could name many non-modern living poets. However, they are not poets any more, or have never been. They were abandoned not by the feel of their own time, which they had not ever had, but by the faculty that enabled them to feel – depict – create something" (*Поэт и время*). What does the feel of one's own time mean? According to Tsvetaeva, "Современность поэта есть его обреченность на время. Обреченность на водительство им."<sup>15</sup>

The start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by revolutions. No great poet could be found in those times who would not have something of his/her own to say. The poetess put it precisely: "The theme of revolution was commissioned by the time. The theme of praising revolution – by the Party... However, commissioning a political theme to a poet is a mis-addressed commission" (*ibid.*).

Being steadfast and unconforming by nature, Tsvetaeva would have never become an eulogist of revolution, though at the same time she admitted that this was her time: "Admit, circumvent, reject revolution – it does not matter, it is within you anyway" (*ibid.*). All researchers of Tsvetaeva's works admit that even if her poems render the theme of revolution, the White Guard or even immigration, it does not mean at all that they are veiled in politics. The poet found it her duty to provide romantic protection to the losers and the doomed. The depiction of human passions in her verses sometimes reach the level of Shakespearean tragism. One of the researches describes her most precisely as "Душа не знающая меры..." Но здесь, на земле, «в мире мер», чувства осуществиться не могут здесь люди при встречах «сшибаются лбом».

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<sup>14</sup> "It was one of the most refined periods in the history of Russian culture ... The period of creative upheaval in poetry and philosophy after a decline, the cultural renaissance at the turn of the century. Besides, the Russian souls were gripped by the premonition of the coming catastrophes. The poets saw not only the pending twilight but also something terrifying coming over Russia and the world."

<sup>15</sup> "A poet's being modern means his being doomed to time, being doomed to the guidance by it."

Лишь в ином мире, в Небе Поэта, мечтанном, совершенном мире, все умыслы должны сбывться..."<sup>16</sup>

Marina Tsvetaeva wrote: "Being modern does not mean to depict but to create your time." And so it happened. However, this is difficult to understand. What is the relationship between poet and time? You can answer the question but the answer is invariably bound to be wrong. We would better resort to the poetess herself: "Простите Христа ради за то, что я – поэт, ибо пиши я так, чтобы вы мне не «прощали», а себя во мне узнавали – я бы не была тем, кто я есть – поэтом" (ibid).<sup>17</sup>

And finally, Tsvetaeva writes in the same article: "And this single thing remains on the skin surface of the world in the same way as the visible world remains on a poet's skin surface." In support of these words I would like to quote an extract from Tsvetaeva's collection of poems that almost replicates Sappho's lines:

*"Разбросанным в пыли по магазинам  
(где их никто не брал и не берет!)  
Моим стихам, как драгоценным винам,  
Настанет свой черед."*<sup>18</sup>

Here is one more quote in the Sapphic style:

*"Смерть и время царят на земле,  
Ты владыками их не зови,  
Все кружась исчезает во мгле  
Неподвижно лишь Солнце Любви."*<sup>19</sup>

This is how the great poets understand time. Many more examples can be cited to illustrate that true poets regard time as part of eternity, that true artists create their time by themselves and from the obscurity of night aspire to the light of the sun, to the light that fills the world with love. In the end, I would like to quote Marina Tsvetaeva again: "По существу все поэты всех времен говорят одно".<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Марина Цветаева, Стихотворения, поэмы, Москва 1997, 21. "...a soul knowing not the measure..., but here in the world, "in the world of measurements", the feelings can not be fulfilled. Here people clash their foreheads as they meet. Only in the other world, in the poet's Heaven – the dreamed, perfect world – all intents must come true ..."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: "Please, forgive my being a poet, for God's sake – because if I wrote so that you did not have to forgive me but recognized yourself in me, I would not be who I am – a poet."

<sup>18</sup> "Scattered in dust in various shops/(where no one has ever taken them),/my verses, like precious wines,/will await their turn."

<sup>19</sup> "Death and time reign on the earth,/all, whirling, vanishes in dark/only the Sun of Love remains motionless."

<sup>20</sup> Any poet of any epoch in essence says the same.