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ANCIENT MOTIFS IN THE WORKS OF GEORGIAN SYMBOLISTS

When I decided to work on this topic, I knew in advance that the sources would not be numerous. However, I believe that the period nevertheless deserves special attention as it is here that Georgian poetry becomes familiarized with ancient names and motifs.

The traces of close cultural relations of the Georgian tribes with the ancient world are lost in the depths of centuries. However, they are not easy to discern in the classical Georgian poetry, which belongs to a much later period. If *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* may offer some parallels with the ancient world – through vigorous efforts at that – the later Georgian poetry cannot be ‘blamed’ of the same: both the poets and the audience are absolutely detached from the ancient world and know almost nothing about it. The poetry of the Revival makes no mention of even a single name either from mythology or from history, which has always been quite the opposite in the European poetry.

The only exclusion is Davit Guramishvili’s *Merry Summer*, which opens with the struggle of winter and spring, which proceeds against the following names: “[He] had assigned Evros as the commander against Cecia; the latter was followed by Lipsi Zepiros Phoenix, Borias, Notos. Summer had Cecia as the commander, where Evros stood idle. He was followed by Argestes, Apil, ergast, Thrascias Livontos.”)¹

Guramishvili may seem to be using some Russian source; however, this is not so as all the names are borrowed from Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani’s *Lexicon*, specifically, the entry for “wind”, while Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani must have been the only person in Georgia having an access to ancient sources.

¹ Davit Guramishvili, *Katsvia the Shepherd, Davitiani*, Tbilisi 1955, 180.

Another instance of quoting ancient names is attested in a five foot quintuplet „ღაკკარგე მინერვა, სიბრძნის ღიღება: (“I lost Minerva, the praise of wisdom”).

It was already the end of the 18th century or the turn of the 19th when the phenomenon, labeled by Akaki Urushadze as *Via Rusica* developed. The author tries to give an in-line definition of the word, probably, being sure that it conveyed nothing to a reader.

The first Georgian poet having a direct access to French and Russian classicist poetry was Alexandre Chavchavadze. The literature in question was full of Greek and Roman names, which in fact could be qualified as a necessary feature of lyric poetry of those times. The poems frequently referred not only to mythological, but also to lyrical characters and their beloved too mainly had ancient names.

Alexandre Chavchavadze paid a tribute to the tradition. However, these names did not quite fit his poetic world, abounding with oriental vocabulary and five-foot quintuplets. „მსწრაფლ აპოლონ მოიწია შურითა და განაგლო თავითირ ფერთა საღებლად“ (“Apollo swiftly came forth with envy and drove Tagtir out to apply colors”), where Tagtir is the name of some star, presumably in Turkish. Or let us consider the following lines integrated into a five-foot quintuplet: „ხლოევ, რაა მაგრე მარგო გარება, არცაღა თუ მომხსლვიხარ დღესა მე“ (“Chloe, why do you let me stride along alone, why do not you accompany me today”). The only case when an ancient name sounds natural in his verse is the following line: “შემოდგომამა ბახუსი საწნახელში ჩააყენა”² (“Autumn stored Bacchus in wine press”).

The trend did not persist with the following generation of poets. The whole of the 19th century passed without any interest in antiquity, apart from the cases when a myth was directly association with Georgia (Prometheus, the Argonauts). Akaki Tsereteli wrote a poem called *Medeia*. However, no other case presents itself.

And at last, in the 1910s, a group of Georgian poets, “Tsisperkantselbi” (“The Poets of Cerulean Drinking-Horn”) came on scene, calling themselves symbolists. Now I will not dwell on what symbolism was, all the more so that the question in itself is quite controversial and no exhaustive definition as yet offers itself. Neither shall I discuss to what extent a particular poet can be found a symbolist, as it may turn out that

² Aleksandre Chavchavadze, *An Amusing Pentametric Verse*, Georgian Prose, vol. 6, Tbilisi 1975, 29.

the only Orthodox symbolist was Valerian Gaprindashvili. However, neither this is important for the present paper. What in fact matters is that by their literary stand, the poets were aesthetes and thanks to this very quality, ancient names and motifs sounded so natural in their writings.

Though I do not aim to dwell on the theoretical issues of symbolism, there are some points that still need to be mentioned.

Georgian symbolism developed under a direct influence of Russian symbolism. Though it has its own original character and does not closely resemble the Russian version, the theoretical grounds are anyway the same. Russian symbolism is highly literate, full of scholarly reminiscences. This was determined not so much by French symbolism as by the taste and literary propensities of Valeri Brysov, the founder and the theoretical "legislator" of Russian symbolism. His close affinity with ancient world was clearly reflected on Russian symbolism on the whole.

Georgian symbolists had a high regard for Brysov as a theorist and as a poet of special significance. It was through Brysov's translations and papers that they became acquainted with and fetishized Baudelaire and Verlaine, Rimbaud and Verharn, also E. A. Poe. Therefore, Brysov's propensity to the ancient works were likewise treated with due consideration. In this respect too Valerian Gaprindashvili was the most orthodox of all.

Valerian Gaprindashvili's poetic world during his symbolist period is a secluded conventional space, scarcely admitting any reverberations of the outer world. This was his principal and deliberate stance. He wrote: "Today poetry is burnt in its kiln, without borrowing anything from life."³ I will not now discuss how truthful this statement is, at least in terms of his own poetry. Several extracts from his own reasoning are sufficient to reject this view. However, it is doubtless that Valerian Gaprindashvili aspired for the fulfillment of this statement. He had another requirement for the new type of poetry, called "the magic of names". "Nowadays poetry abounds in names like Calios' fingers with precious stones. ... At first, a name has a real content, but it gradually gets rid of reality and becomes a value of its own. The whole Greek mythology now is the magic of names, distanced from its initial ground."⁴

Naturally, when a modern poet mentions an ancient mythological name, it is impossible to avoid some distance from the initial context as it now serves a different poetic intention. However, to our surprise, Valerian

³ Gaprindashvili V., *Poems, Translations, Essays*, Tbilisi 1990, 523.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 523.

Gaprindashvili believes that the names are to be fully purged of the old content, which is likewise impossible as they retain not only their phonetic sound, but also stir specific associations and reminiscences. Anyway, according to the theory, Valerian Gaprindashvili's poetry is expected to be full of ancient names, which is not so at all, with the exception of "sphinxes", "demons" and "chimeras", mentioned in his every other poem.

This too has a theoretical grounding in Gaprindashvili's works, as he was inspired by a desire to create new myths and raise poets and literary characters to the ranks of deities: "Today poets replace Greek gods in poetry: Chatterton, Rimbaud, Besiki, Machabeli, Hoffmann, Villiers de l'Isle, Adam enrapture poet's dream to a no lesser degree than Zeus and Apollo, Aphrodite and Athena ... If earlier there was Apollo in poetry, now there is Goethe, if there was Medusa Gorgon before, now there are Edgar and Maldoror... Then the poet was inspired by Hellenic and Roman gods, now he is inspired by the fantastic names of the poets of the past, earlier, the poet was inspired by Orpheus and Eurydice, while now he is inspired by Beatrice and Alighieri."⁵

He goes even farther with regard to Alighieri, declaring that the name of Beatrice is more important than of the author of the *Divina Comedia*. The extract was quoted to illustrate the poet's high regard for the Hellenic deities and heroes, even if conveyed through negation. The names are enumerated exhaustively – the list is longer than cited. This too points to some kind of association with the Greek world. Ancient world was much closer to the poet than in earlier Georgian literature.

In the poems of the period, Gaprindashvili frequently mentions Ophelia in an attempt to mould an unattainable symbolic image of the beloved and, despite his theoretical divergence from antiquity, nevertheless resorts to ancient Greek mythos:

ვით ევრიდიკას ორფეოსი – მე ოფელიას
 ვისმობ დაისის მიუწვდომელ ალურ მღუღიდან.
 ელიზიუმი უკეთესი სამყოფელია
 და ჩემმა გრფობამ მას წყურვილი ვერ გაუღიდა.
 მეგონა: იგი აზრდილების სადაისოდან
 წამომყვებოდა, ვუმღერებდი ლექსებს მთვარეულს.
 თუმცა ასულმა აღტაცება ლექსით იცოდა,
 ვერ დავამორე ფრთადახრილი წრეს სიმზარეულს.

⁵ Ibid., Declaration (New Mythology), 544.

“Like Orpheus calling Eurydice,/ I summon Ophelia from the flame-coloured boundary of the unattainable harbor of the sun./ Elysium is the better place to dwell/ and my love failed to increase her quench.

“I thought she would follow me from the harbor of shadows and sang to her moony verses. But the virgin was aware of the delight of verse./ And I could not take her away from the dreamy circle, her wings being folded.”

And finally:

მე მოვიხედავ, ცხელ საკირის წრეს გადასული,
და ბნელ სიჩუმის უღაბური ხმა მიპასუხებს.⁶

“In will look back, having passed the circle of the hot kiln,/ and the barren voice of black darkness will respond to me”.

It is needless to remind the readers well acquainted with the Hellenic world of the events Orpheus and Eurydice encountered on their way from Hades. As we can see, the parallels are drawn successfully.

Valerian Gaprindashvili quotes ancient names in his other poems as well. However, as they do not have any special functions apart from the above-mentioned “magic of names”, there is no need to provide interpretations. Therefore, I will not quote them in the paper.

Paolo Iashvili’s works lack reminiscences on antiquity. Geronti Kikodze notes that Paolo had little in common with symbolists in terms of his outlook and propensities. Indeed, unlike Valerian Gaprindashvili, his poetic world is oriented to the outer reality. He does not create a conventional poeticized environment and one may hardly expect to come across an ancient flow in his works, even in terms of theoretical probability.

I will diverge for a while from the main point and mention that a few years ago the name of certain Elene Bakradze was brought to light, who claimed to be the author of the Darian Cycle. The issue stirred hot and lengthy disputed. Paolo Iashvili’s authorship was questioned. However, some sources must have escaped close attention: In 1922, Valerian Gaprindashvili writes in his letter “Declaration (new mythology)”: “A poet can create a new myth...”⁷ and mentions among others Elene Darian. I believe this argument does not require any further corroboration. Who else could know the truth better than Valerian Gaprindashvili, who was a supporter and partaker in all symbolist initiatives.

⁶ Ibid., Ophelia-Eurydice, 106.

⁷ Ibid., Declaration (New Mythology), 545.

Let us return to our main point. Titsian Tabidze's poetic world is slightly more oriented to book and literature. However, in his symbolist period he chose ancient East – Chaldea or Phoenicia as the space for his privacy. Even in that period, the system of symbols he employed was oriented to the reality, to immediate experience. The most recurrent of the literary images is demon, which however, is more of Lermontov's demon and thus has little in common with the ancient world.

Leaving aside Carthage, the Phoenician goddess Tanit and Salambo, borrowed rather from Flaubert's novel than from antiquity, only two interesting cases offer themselves in terms of our immediate goal. They are mentioned in the poem *The Rioni Port devoted to the drainage of Kolkheti marshes*. The narrative starts from an ancient period:

ჰიპოკრატე ძველი ბერძენი,
 ასე წერდა ამ ქვეყანაზე,
 (სჯობდა რომ სულაც არ დაეწერა):
 ქვეყანა, რომელსაც ჩაუდის ფაზის მდინარე,
 არის ჭაობიანი, ცხელი და ნოტიო,
 შემოსილია გარშემო გყით,
 ყოველდღე მოდის დიდი წვიმები ...⁸

"Hippocrates the ancient Greek,/ wrote the following about this land/ (he would better not write at all):/ The land which is washed by the Phasis River,/ is wet, warm and humid,/ set in woods,/ where it rains heavily everyday."

And so forth. This in only to provide evidence as there is nothing to comment on. The quoted text is basically written in free verse and therefore, Hippocritus' words are rendered precisely.

The other case is more interesting:

ვიყავი ადრე მე ანტონიოს,
 დღეს მართლა ვგავარ ნერონს მკივანი.
 ბევრი ოცნება გამოვიგლოვე
 და ბევრი მდაღავს ახლაც მგკივანი.⁹

"Earlier I used to be Antony,/ and now I truly resemble Nero as I lament./ I have mourned over many a dream/ and many still torture me painfully".

At the first sight, there is nothing important beyond the words. Nero appears as the embodiment of madness. However, it is unclear what

⁸ Titsian Tabidze, *Rioni-Port*, Selected Works, Tbilisi 1960, 211.

⁹ *Ibid.*, *Earlier I used to be*, 156.

accounts for the reference to Antony. Pasternak's Russian translation reads as follows:

Я был красив как Антиной,
Теперь полнею как Нерон.¹⁰

In my opinion, the publishers of the book could not understand the name Antinous and "corrected" it to Antony. The rhyming suggests the same – "*antinoe – gamoviglove*". Though it may not altogether successful, Titsian Tabidze normally found such rhyming satisfactory. The line does not refer to Antinous of the *Odyssey*, the most distinguished suitor of Penelope. The poet alludes to the beautiful Greek lad from the retinue of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who was found drowned in Nile. It is not known whether Antinous was killed or committed suicide. Hadrian was overcome by unparalleled grief: for years he would erect temples to in the lad's honour and tried to establish his cult. Thus, the meaning of the lines is quite clear: earlier the poet used to be as beautiful as Antinous, while now he resembled Nero, fattened and anguished.

Tsitsian Tabidze's works occasionally mention some more ancient names:

მინდა დღეს მოვეწყო მართლა ლირიკულად –
ჩვენშიც შეიძლება, რომ იყოს პინდარი.¹¹

"I would now like to set myself to a lyric tune – / we too may convey Pindar within us".

Most of all the poet mentions the Argonauts and Orpheus. Ancient names appear sporadically in the works of minor Georgian symbolists too, such as Shalva Apkhaidze, Shalva Karmeli, a gifted young poet, who passed away at an early age, etc.

Grigol Robakidze's attitude to antiquity is somewhat different – more conceptual. Being older than the generation of the Cerulean Drinking Horn poets, he was less subject to the influence of foreign symbolists, and did not even find himself a symbolist; however, as he was admitted as the leader of the group and had a remarkable impact on the whole trend, it will be incorrect not to mention his name among the symbolists.

In some respect, he believed to be the child of Hellas, as rendered in the following line: "ჰელლადის შვილი ვარ ერთგული მე „ამორ ფაგის“

¹⁰ Тициан Табидзе, Избранное, Москва 1963, 95.

¹¹ Titsian Tabidze, Dadaistic Madrigal, Selected Works, Tbilisi 1960, 170.

("The Child of Hellas I am, devoted to "amor fati"). However, his being son of Hellas stems from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In its classical understanding, the culture of Hellas, naturally, is associated with harmony and light, and with the mood rendered in Galaktion's poem: „ელადა, ელადა, აქ სული ატარებს თვის მსუბუქ სამოსელს“ ("Hellas, Hellas, here the soul wears its light garment"). The new epoch also saw in the Hellenic culture a different beginning too. Nietzsche distinguished between two principles: Apollonian, which is light and harmonious and Dionysian – a dark, irrational, ecstatic, orgiastic stream. Grigol Robakidze aspires for the embodiment of the second one.

ხელები ეინი ალესილი ქარვის კალოსი!
 დიდი შუადღის ავბორცობით დავიგეშებით,
 ღვთის საბაზოვით მეწამულნი: ვიწვით, ვითვრებით.
 რასხებ-შებმული გყდება პანის სპილენძის კვერი
 და სიყვარულის ბნელას გვაყრის მზის ავი გვერი.¹²

"Hands sharpened with the passion of amber threshing ground!/We will be incited with midday salacity,/we, tortured by proximity with god: burn and go tipsy./ Pan's brass threshing board, with bay horses harnessed to it, breaks apart/and the malicious threshing board of the sun makes us swoon with love."

The copper threshing board is an attribute of Dionysus rather than of the pan. Tigers and lions used to be harnessed in it. However, for Robakidze, pan is not merely a four-legged comic deity; first of all he is the creature that provokes panic, he is the great pan, whose death marked the end to one great civilization. The poet imagines him as Dionysus, whom he resembles by his inner orgiastic nature, madness and irrationality.

"ჩემი ღერბია დიონისეს მედალიონი"¹³ ("My emblem is Dionysus' medallion"), he declares and returns to the theme in another poem called *Irrubakidze*.

უსმენს მხოლოდ ქვესკნელის გუგუნს,
 ერთხელ აიწყვიტა და გაიჭიხინა
 დიონისის სიტყვა ...¹⁴

"He listens only to the roar of abyss/ once he broke loose and neighed Dionysus' word."

¹² Grigol Robakidze, "The Great Midday", *The Poets of the Cerulean Horn, One Hundred Poems, Poetry, Tbilisi 2007*, 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, "Automedalion", 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *Irrubakidze*, 18.

In Grigol Robakidze's poetic imagination the Dionysian beginning ties together Eros and Thanatos in an eternal knot. His well-known play *Londa* is devoted to this theme. Containing no explicit references to the ancient world, the play anyway abounds in associations with Hellas. One can clearly recognize the rhythms and tones of ancient Greek dithyrambs and dramas of destiny. Here too prevails the Dionysian principle. Eros and Thanatos are interlocked.

Pursuant to this very idea, he refers to the mythical relationship of Alexander the Great and the Amazons several times. The story is narrated at length in an unfinished, or rather, abandoned novel *Palestra*. The seeds of the same motif can be discerned already in the poem *Irrubakidze*.

ირანის თეთრი ღამე ქვის ლომზე გავათენე.
 (ფილიპის ძე თვითონ ამ ლომის სახელია).
 ეს იყო ხამადანში:
 საცა ერთ ღამეს დიდმა ალექსანდრემ
 ათი ათას მხედარს ათი ათასი ქალი
 მოთენითლ ბალახებზე ცოლებად გაუფინა.
 მე მხოლოდ მომაგონდა –
 მაგრამ დავიკვილე: რომ ვნახე გაღალახვა...¹⁵

"I spent awake the white Iranian night on a stony lion./ (The son of Phillip is the name of the Lion itself)./ This was in Khamadan;/ where one night Alexander the Great/ lay 10 000 maids as wives to 10 000 horsemen on the wearied grass./ I only recollected –/ but I cried: that I saw the trance."

One more poem to quote in this regard is *Horn-butted by the Sun*, which the author intended to be included into a drama to be called *Kardu*:

ყივჩაღეთს იყო
 ქალი მოვიტაცე.
 ცხენზე შემოვიღე ღელაღი ავაბა.
 ტანი დაყურსული გავმხვართე უნაგირზე.
 თეთრი თემოების ვიხილე გახელება.
 ხგოლნენ აგეხილი აფხორცი მუხლები
 და თვითონ ნადირი გავხდი მე ნადირი.
 კოცნა კბენა იყო,
 ალერსი – დანა.
 მუცელი გაზნექილი
 პირით გადავღადრე
 და მარჯვე ნაპრაღიდან

¹⁵ Ibid.

ვესროლე მდინარეს.
 გუჩები სისხლიანი
 ფაფარზე ავიწმინდე.¹⁶

"It was in the land of Kivchaghs,/ I kidnapped a woman./I put on my horse a female cheetah,/ sprawled the curvy body of the saddle,/saw the madness of white hips./ The lecherous knees would jump lustfully,/And I the beast turned into a prey (And I the capturer turned into a captured beast). /The kiss was a bite, /the caress was a knife. /I slashed with my mouth/ the bent stomach/ and from an apt gap/ threw it to the river./I dried my bloody lips with the mane."

At the first sight, nothing in the poem seems to be ancient. However, as Grigol Robakidze himself notes, the quoted extract was inspired by Tacitus' story, specifically, the passage that relates about Radamant's and Zenobia's adventure. "Hardly any story has impressed me that much", he writes. "I saw in the woman a real "earth" with lustful breasts and the will capable of self-sacrifice. In the man I saw a real superhuman essence, abiding with the love for fate (amor fati)".

As the parallel is exhaustively discussed in Akaki Bakradze's book *Kardu*, dedicated to Robakidze, I will not dwell on it any more. I will only note that here too Eros and Thanatos are interwoven.

It is common knowledge that Galaktion Tabidze used to belong to the Cerulian Horns but afterwards gradually moved away from the group without confronting anyone in public. The only exception was Grigol Robakidze, whose "fits of madness" and "trances" obviously appealed to Galaktion as false and insincere, and compelled him to oppose the elderly poet openly.

"The fantasist is greater in the first/and lesser in the second,/the first is a poet,/and the second is all shows".¹⁷

If these lines may seem too general to identify the referent, the first version of the verse leaves no room for doubts as it directly mentions Robakidze. The poem may also refer to Galaktion himself, as the symbolic trend is no less obvious in his poems. However, this topic has been profoundly treated for years by our colleague, Ketil Gardapkhadze and therefore, I feel there is nothing I could add to it.

As I have mentioned in the beginning, the material is scanty. The cult of antiquity has never been established in Georgian literature. However, after the period of symbolist, references to antiquity do not sound as odd as in Alexandre Chavchavadze's poems.

¹⁶ Grigol Robakidze, *Centauris*, Dramas, Tbilisi 1990, 260.

¹⁷ Galaktion Tabidze, *Others Wail*, Tbilisi 1977, 308.

I would like to cite an example from Konstantine Chichinadze's works. Though having no connections with symbolism, he too reckoned himself among the pupils of Valeri Brysov. Therefore, I believe it will not be inappropriate to quote him in here. In his *Apology to Rion* he states most eloquently that at the sources of the Phasis river, "With her swift hounds and her bow,/White Diana strode up the meadows,/to tire her passionless body."¹⁸

In conclusion I would like to say that despite the many ages-long close relations between the two nations, we failed to trace the direct influence of antiquity on old Georgian poetry. If ecclesiastic poetry introduced an equivalent of the iambic trimetre, whose one rhythmical version is still used today ("შოთა ბრძენ იყო, სიბრძნის მოყვარე ფრიალ/ფილოსოფოსი, მეტყველი სპარსთა ენის"), secular poetry does not offer even such a case. Several ancient names are mentioned only at the end of the 18th and the start of the 19th centuries. For the first time in Georgian literature these names and several motifs of antiquity establish a perceptible place the 1910s and 1920s, in the poems of symbolists. If in Valerian Gaprindashvili's and other poet's works (such as Shalva Karmeli's poem *Café*. "A princess has come with a dog, rustling and gentle like Artemis¹⁹) reference to ancient names is somewhat ornamental, in Grigol Robakidze's works it is more functional. In Galaktion's poetry, which has not been discussed in this paper, both types of references can be found, but the functional one probably prevails as could be expected. These tendencies were not carried on in the following period, under the pressure of social realism. It would anyway be interesting to follow the thread. However, but this is already a different issue.

¹⁸ Konstantine Chichinadze, *Rioni Apology*, Anthology of Poetry, Tbilisi 1971, 62.

¹⁹ Shalva Karmeli, *Fairy Streets*, Tbilisi 2000, 60.