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THE ARGONAUTICA IN THE WORKS OF GEORGIAN SYMBOLISTS

Symbolism as a literary trend entered Georgia at the outset of the 20th century. In 1915 it was established in institutional terms, when a group of young poets formed a new literary order called 'Blue Horns'. It was the period when Georgian artistic consciousness became extremely feeble. Shabby imitations of the 19th century great authors brought almost to nonsense the literary life of the country. The new generation found it impossible to follow the path. The only way for them to fulfill their inherent vocation and calling was Symbolism.¹ The members of the Blue Horn shared completely the aesthetic principles of Symbolism, provided arguments for the necessity of establishing this trend in Georgia, looked for national foundation to build Symbolism on, tried to combine western European, Russian and Georgian outlooks, and give an original, peculiar character to Georgian Symbolism. 'We must shape our Georgian profile', Titsian Tabidze wrote, 'the basic experience of being a Georgian is our primary requirement. It should imply our temperament, our sensibility, our image. We will unite the sharpness of the West and the sunny relaxation of the East.'²

This very original property of Georgian Symbolism underlay the reception of ancient culture by Georgian Symbolists. I will dwell only on one point of the comprehensive topic called the reception of ancient culture in the works of Georgian Symbolists. This point is the cycle of Argonautic myths.

For French and Russian Symbolists, the Argonautica was the source of symbolic figures with strong passions and unforgettable events. Among the reasons compelling them to refer to the Argonautica was also the unbiased

¹ The Legend of the Red Rose, Tbilisi, 1985, 238 (in Georgian).

² Blue Horns, 1990, 65 (in Georgian).

character of it, which enabled a poet to rise over earthly being and become initiated into perpetual values. What about Georgian Symbolists? What did the Argonautica mean for them? I will dwell on one group of Georgian Symbolists whose literary activities and works imply especially interesting and even controversial processes (G. Tabidze, V. Gaprindashvili, S. Shanshiashvili, etc.). Georgian Symbolists were unanimous in one of the theses – the understanding of the Argonautica as a cultural and historical phenomenon. They perceived the Argonaut myth as an inexhaustible source of human creativity, re-inviting epochs and encouraging the discovery of new layers in the meanings of these everlasting images. On the other hand, the Argonautica was the past of their own country; it was the point that linked the past glory of Georgia with the most important values of the world culture.

Throughout centuries, most of the interest was attracted not by the Argonautic voyage itself, but by Medea's image, which underwent remarkable metamorphosis. Euripides' *Medea* penetrated the whole European literature of the following period. The attempts to justify her deeds were made no earlier than the 18th-19th centuries. If Medea used to be perceived as a ruthless witch before, the writers of the following period presented her as a Barbarian woman deceived and dejected by Greeks.³ Almost the whole Georgian literature, starting with Akaki Tsereteli, is aimed at the rehabilitation of Medea's image, while the Argonauts' voyage is perceived in a negative context.

The study of this issue in the works of Georgian Symbolists revealed two different pictures:

1. On the one hand, we have the literature which follows the existing line and presents Medea as the symbol of a deceived and dejected woman. Interestingly, the authors belonging to this group were distinguished by their innovative approach to the reception of ancient heritage. In 1922, the most Orthodox representative of Georgian Symbolism, Valerian Gaprindashvili wrote a thesis called 'Declaration – New Mythology', where, following a logical principle, he developed the idea that despite the productivity, the prolific character of ancient images in world literature, 'mythology has lost links with our consciousnesses.' The poet looked for other allusions, trying to replace the existing symbols with the new ones. 'Today, Greek gods are replaced with poets Chaterton, Rimbault. ... They fascinate poetic dream no less than Zeus and Apollo, Aphrodite and Athena. ... If there was Medusa Gorgon in the

³ E. Frenzel, *Stoffe der Weltliteratur, ein Lexicon Dichtungsgeschichtlicher Lang – Schnitte* Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1976, 15; G. Hight, *Traditional Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, Oxford University Press, London, Oxford, New York, 1962, 9.

past, now there is Edgar and Maldaror, Gods are now replaced by heroes, Ophelia, Hamlet.⁴

The poets who agreed with the declaration did not offer any specially developed ancient plot or motif, or an ancient symbol to become the principle line of their poem owing to its implications. The only exception is the myth of the Argonauts. The verses and poems inspired by the Argonaut theme and Medea have one principle common property: the desire to justify Medea's behaviour (T. Tabidze, K. Nadiradze, V. Shanshiashvili, etc.).⁵ Remarkably, S. Shanshiashvili went so far as to generalize the problem and consider it at a larger scale. This tendency is reflected in the poems *Media* and *Media and Helen* (The second poem consists of three parts, which in fact are independent poems. They are *Dementia*, *Jason and Reno* and *Fair Helen*). Although the plot of the first poem exactly repeats Euripides' *Medea* and the development of events is likewise identical, the author's attitude to the events is absolutely different. Reno is Trojan and Medea is Colchian, which means that both are from the East – thus the circle is made up in accordance with the poet's intention. He attempts to present the opposition of the East and the West and to show the moral privilege of the East. This idea is directly stated in *Fair Helen*. The only thing that interests the poet in the Trojan cycle is that although Helen brought so many disasters to Troy, she is still admired and loved in her husband's land, unlike Medea:

Here is a word-for-word translation of a fragment from the poem:

'But about Medea / he says nothing, / that the fair lady of Colchis / was so denounced by the West. / While Helen / was beloved and glorified.'

The following are Helen's words as she is mourning dead Paris:

'Your people have become fond of me, / while mine proved wicked – / this is how they treated Media.'⁶

The cycle of S. Shanshiashvili's poems was aimed at the rehabilitation of Medea's image. The poet needed more arguments, and that is why he composed the story of Reno abandoned by Jason. Thus he generalized the issue to the level of the East and the West.

The poets distinguished by the innovative approach to the reception of antiquity were absolutely traditional with respect to the Argonauts.

2. As concerns the reception of ancient traditions, a special poetic world is can be distinguished among Georgian Symbolists. In fact, it is unique in terms of profound and intensive allusions to Greek and Roman traditions. This is

⁴ V. Gaprindashvili, Poems, Translations, Essays, Letters from the Poet's Archive, Tbilisi, 1990, 49 (in Georgian).

⁵ T. Tabidze, Works in Three Volumes, 1966, vol.1, vol. 3 (in Georgian); K. Nadiradze, Poems, Tbilisi, 1992 (in Georgian); V. Gaprindashvili, Poems, Tbilisi, 1988 (in Georgian).

⁶ S. Shanshiashvili, Works, vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1986, 307-311 (in Georgian).

the poetic world of Galaktion Tabidze. Although he was not the member of the Blue Horns, I find it essential to analyze his poems in this paper as he is the author of the best pieces of Georgian symbolic poetry. He was not confined to the standards of any poetic school. Surprisingly enough, the poet, who can be freely called Philhellenic, whose poems abound of ancient symbols and images, the principle pathos lying in the contexts made up of ancient images and notions, the poet whose works, either fully or partly, follow ancient plots, and who sometimes creates himself the world connected to various periods of ancient history, offers no poem based on special artistic treatment of the Argonaut theme. However, Galaktion uses terms and notions connected to the Argonaut legend at different levels of interpretation. These elements can be conventionally grouped into two:⁷

- 1) A mythological notion is presented as a symbol or a poetic argument, but the use of it is limited to a few lines. The notions imply in themselves the information necessary to understand the fragment of the poem and are closely related to the general structure and conceptual design of the poem.
- 2) The second group includes ancient terms and notions that tend to make up a system, a context relevant to the whole poem. The mythological notions make up a unity within the poem. In fact, the poet creates systems, although small, related to the Argonaut legend.

In Galaktion's poems, the introduction of the Argonaut theme is always connected with the reminiscences of the legendary past of Georgia. As an example, I will cite a fragment from his poem 'The Surami Fortress':

'Kartlos came to settle in our places, / that will not justify him, / the Golden Fleece in Colchis in 1350 disturbs the Argonaveli (Argoan).'⁸

The number 1350 has a very interesting position in the poem. In my opinion, it refers to the assumed date of the Argonauts' expedition. Obviously, through the key terms of the fragment Galaktion tries to link with each other Greek and Georgian traditional information as he presents the ancient past of Georgia. I would also like to dwell on one interesting element. The poet repeatedly uses the Greek appellation Argonaut through the form Argonaveli – Argoan. Evidently, either intentionally or unintentionally the poet reflects the Greek suffix of the appellation and makes it sound Georgian. As a result, he receives Argonaveli – Argoan. The poetic interpretation of the episodically used mythological image attests not only to the original poetic vision of Galaktion, but also to his profound awareness of each notion and his surprising ability to present poetic images in a double way: traditionally as

⁷ K. Gardapkhadze, *Ancient Terms and Notions in the Poetic Language of Galaktion*, Tbilisi, 1995 (in Georgian).

⁸ G. Tabidze, *Works in Twelve Volumes*, 1996, vol. 7, 241 (in Georgian).

well as ingeniously and innovatively. As an example, I will cite another poem, which does not have a title. Here the poet puts a question:

What is gold / in the boundless blue of Achara?⁹

Along with the explanations that follow the question, we come across the following lines:

‘The belt of the Argonauts / the cloud in colorfulness.’⁹

So, the gold of Achara refers to something that is the most precious in Achara, including the legendary past, among whose most renowned pages are the Argonauts’ voyage. Colorfulness is the characteristic property of Acharian sky and nature, which is the Acharian ‘gold’, while the Argonauts with belts, who have come to Achara to take away the gold, bring in a certain conflict. Doubtlessly, the poet created an absolutely extraordinary poetic image. ‘The cloud of the Argonauts’ belt’ can be interpreted as the symbol of the shadow which brings a conflict into the harmonious world. Remarkably, the above-mentioned poem is the only piece where the Argonauts’ voyage is presented in a negative context. Galaktion is not interested in the outcome of the voyage. He is more concerned with what is related to the glory of Colchis. So, it is noteworthy that the terms used by Galaktion lack the meaning of oppositeness, characteristic of Greek mythological information and Georgian literary tradition. If we go back to the term ‘Argonaveli’, in Galaktion’s poem it has a positive sense and as it was mentioned above, acts as an indicator supposed to link the glorious past of Georgia with the most significant values of world culture. The same is true about Medea. Medea’s activities in Greece escape Galaktion’s attention. The poet is interested in Medea as the symbol of Colchian fame and therefore, presents the name as the symbol synonymous of Colchis. Other terms related to Colchis (Phasis, Ea, Dioskuria, etc.) also have a double function: on the one hand, they facilitate poetic reflection of mythological information as a system and are consequently used in their traditional meaning, and on the other hand, they convey the glory of Colchis.

The above-mentioned leads to the conclusion that the originality of Georgian symbolism was best exposed in the development of ancient themes, and in particular, of the Argonaut theme. The study revealed two different pictures: on the one hand, we have the literature, Galaktion Tabidze’s poetry, which lacks the meaning of opposition characteristic of Georgian literature in general; however, it does not offer even a single case of special literary treatment of the theme. On the other hand, we have a group of poets, who although were distinguished by their original outlook and innovative attitude towards the reception of ancient culture, remain nevertheless biased as concerns the treatment of the Argonaut theme.

⁹ G. Tabidze, Works in Twelve Volumes, Tbilisi, 1994, vol. 1, 279 (in Georgian).