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### *Poetics and Politics of Georgian Modernism*

It all started in Kutaisi, a city in western Georgia with an ancient past and a certain type of ancient culture.

In Kutaisi the publication of the Blue Horns magazine caused a lot of noise. This was the first magazine of the Georgian symbolist group “Tsiferkantselebi” (Blue Horns). Young poets were criticized in the press for their pessimism, suicidality and erotic themes. Paolo Iashvili was the leader of this group and the editor of the magazine. He went to Paris, the birthplace of symbolism, and decided to spread new ideas in his country. Russian writer Ilya Erenburg recalls his meeting with Paolo in the famous Café de la Rotonde of Paris: “Paolo was at that time a thin and slender (twenty-year-old) young man. He kept asking me: “Which cafe was Verlaine sitting in?” When will Picasso come?”

From the memoirs of Galaktion Tabidze, an outstanding representative of Georgian symbolism, we learn that representatives of the Blue Horns came to the presentation of the magazine dressed in strange clothes. They attached rooster spurs to their jackets and walked along Kutaisi Boulevard. Rooster spurs were chosen because they were shaped like a horn. Symbolism can be seen in the very name “Blue Horns”: blue is the color of poetry, and the horn is a symbol of bohemian life. Color was of great importance to the Symbolists. Poets have often used colors in a seemingly inappropriate manner. But it was all done to impress an audience. Paolo Iashvili said: “I’m tired of the yellow Dante,” Galaktion wrote about “Purple Snow.”

Georgian Symbolists lived bohemian lives. In Kutaisi at that time you could often see young people dressed strangely. One of them, Titian Tabidze, had a red carnation attached to his chest. Here we can recall Mayakovsky's yellow scarf, Théophile Gautier's red vest or Oscar Wilde's green carnation.

The preface of the Blue Horns magazine revealed the eccentricity of the group members, rejection of the art of the past, interest in new technologies, and self-praise. They claimed to be the heirs of the European avant-garde. The Book of Masks by the French symbolist poet Remy de Gourmont was held in great esteem. They were already familiar with this book. Representatives of “Blue Horns” believed that the artistic nature of the Georgians, their ability to transform themselves, corresponded to this requirement of symbolism. Paolo Iashvili is an example of such transformation. He published poems with erotic content under the pseudonym of a fictitious woman – Elene Dariani. Representatives of the Blue Horns kept the author's identity a secret. This kind of play was common among modernists. With this, Paolo Iashvili seemed to repeat the case of Guillaume Apollinaire, when the French poet once wrote under the pseudonym of a woman, Louise Lalanne.

The emergence of symbolism had its external and internal reasons in Georgia: On the one hand, events unfolding in the external world and on the other, peculiarities of Georgian character. David Kakabadze, a famous Georgian modernist painter and theoretician, wrote in this connection: "By force of national apperception, a nation receives what can be adjusted to its national peculiarities and is closely linked to it. In this regard, symbolism can bring a lot to the Georgian nation and first and foremost word that has been forgotten in our country". He referred to love of masks as a national peculiarity of Georgians. The concept of masks in general is a neo-baroque phenomenon.

After Georgia gained independence, creative people moved to Tbilisi. Tbilisi is becoming a city of poets. At this time, art cafes are already opening in Tbilisi. In the café 'International' Georgian symbolists declared that Tbilisi is the only city of poets and poetry exists only in Tbilisi.

**Motive of closeness to traditions** can be seen in the manifesto Paolo Iashvili wrote for the *Blue Horns* magazine ("Paris is the holiest country after Georgia" – this phrase makes a clear reference to Georgia's place on the world's cultural map, which is definitely due to its ancient traditions), which is further developed in Titsian Tabidze's demand of making Georgian art and literature European and "adjusting" Georgian poetry "to the European radius" ("I put the rose of Hafez in Prudhomme's vase / I plant Baudelaire's flowers of evil in Besiki's garden" – *Chaldean Cities*; and what Titsian Tabidze described as "Georgia's national resurrection" in his essay published in the second issue of the *Blue Horns* magazine, implying the prominent positions Georgia occupied in the past).

Georgian symbolists popularised the images, ideas, and works of Western romanticists or symbolists. They not only mentioned with great respect names of Edgar Poe, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, and Oscar Wilde, but also translated their works (Paolo Iashvili translated Arthur Rimbaud, Galaktion Tabidze translated Byron, Shelley, and Verlaine).

Georgian modernists found support in the remote past that could justify their allegations that it is Tbilisi that is the world capital, not Paris. To prove this, they tried to reach the origins of the civilisation. "Georgia – Phoenix" – the title proper of this manifesto of Georgian futurists emphasises a vision of the future and the importance of the vision as a renovator. The aspiration towards renovation was expressed also in a search for roots: Titsian Tabidze wanted to discover links to Chaldea and Grigol Robakidze was searching for Urphänomen.

Connections between the East and West were also topical in Georgian modernism from the very beginning. Grigol Robakidze wrote: "Western Europe is dear to us, but we cannot cede the East for the sake of the West. It would be better to mark their wedding with a Georgian feast". Interest in the East was keen also in the era of romanticism. Such a position of modernism definitely shows opposition to logocentrism as a manifestation of Occidentalism, where patriarchal position, positivism, and rationalism held leading positions. Preference was given to Orientalism as non-determinist and a priori in nature and irrational in origin, because as it became clear in the era of modernism, the truths maintained by the Western logocentric world, proved to be erroneous.

It was no accident that Tbilisi became the arena for modernist trends, because "all this merged in Tbilisi and their nature was determined by features of Tbilisi – on the one hand, traditional aristocratic representationism and on the other, the layer of craftsmen in the city, who were mostly of eastern origin and of extremely artistic and inflammatory nature so characteristic of artistic bohemia, both being merged in it, working polyphonically as an 'orchestra'. There was, on the one hand, the avant-garde nature of intellectual life in Tbilisi oriented on innovations, encompassing artistic avant-garde as an aesthetic position, and on the other hand, the deep roots of the traditional oriental Christian culture. This multi-layer nature, layers covering each other, and the merger of local, Western, and Eastern, innovative and traditional created the 'fantastic' and open nature of Tbilisi, which determined Georgian/Tbilisi avant-garde and, having rejected the private nature of creation, came out onto the streets. It decided to influence society in Tbilisi and attack their conscience, but it was Tbilisi proper that provoked all this" (<http://www.modernism.ge/index.php?lang=geo>).

Cafes opened mainly on Golovin Avenue, present Rustaveli Avenue. Lively creative processes take place here. Lectures on new poetry are given here. One of the most popular cafes was Chimerion. "Chimerion" is a unique case, since only the frescoes of the Paris "Coupol" and "Chimerion" have been preserved in almost complete form. During this period, Georgia became the cultural center of the Caucasus. It's home to an outstanding creative community. The walls of the cafe are painted by Lado Gudishvili, David Kakabadze, Ilya Zdanevich, Yuri Degen, Sergei Sudeikin. Concerts and theater performances are held every day. The former chef of the Prince of Oldenburg – Chef Papa-Vanichka – offers guests dishes of Asian and European cuisine. The French singer Margarita also sang in one of these cafes; Margarita, whom the artist Niko Pirosmiani fell in love with. Maybe after one of his performances he decided to paint a portrait of Margarita. Pirosmiani himself was discovered by French artists living in

Georgia at that time - Ilya and Kiril Zdanevich. During the First World War they lived in Georgia. About Tbilisi at that time, the British journalist Karl Bikhoff wrote: "Here you will find very strange people, poets and artists from Petrograd and Moscow, philosophers, dancers, singers, actors. Paolo Iashvili, the leader of young Georgian poets, climbed onto a chair on the main boulevard of Tbilisi, in the International cafe... and said out loud - not Paris, but Tbilisi - the center of world culture."

In the 1910-20s artists and writers from different parts of the world came to Tbilisi. Poets and artists fleeing the Russian Revolution gather in Tbilisi. Ilya Zdanevich, Alexey Kruchonykh and Igor Terentyev create a new artistic union "41 degrees" in Tbilisi to denote the geographical latitude of Tbilisi. Titian Tabidze recalled that artists and poets from Russia cried with joy when they saw electric lighting. It was here that the legend that Georgia was an oasis arose.

Symbolism in Georgia will be replaced by expressionism – themes of fear, anxiety, hopelessness, despair, sadness, disappointment and pathetic mood.

Nietzsche had a major influence on expressionists with his ideas of dead God, superman, and eternal return, and Apollonian and Dionysian concepts, which were based on a myth and renovation.

Return to myths is a sign of renovation for expressionists. The Nietzschean conception of eternal return proved to be appropriate for Georgian modernists' desire of and aspiration towards renovation, which becomes obvious in Titsian Tabidze's essay *With Blue Horns*, although he does not mention Nietzsche in it. The same is true of a short essay titled *Declaration of Blue Horns* published in the *Barrikady* newspaper. "Adam Mickiewicz said: Those who lost their Motherland are able to understand love of the Motherland. Thus, love of Georgian poets is understandable, because Georgia has been lost for dozens of centuries. This is why Georgian messianism will always be justified. This may be a curse for the nation. This may be a twist of fate. However, nation that fails to create today a culture that will be universal in nature and that will not be justified at the level of humankind is going to disappear". The demand of overcoming the "ethnographic boundaries of Georgian culture" (K. Gamsakhurdia) bears the same meaning.

Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, a representative of expressionist movement, regarded myths as a source of renewal: "Crisis is the waking up of our soul from the magic of dreaming and myths. Crisis? It is being without myths for us: Nonbeing ... was a myth from the very beginning. Everything created in this world was created with myths. Myths preceded the being of humans. Myths were the initial intention of God-man and art. And when everything becomes nothing, what will remain will probably be myths" (K. Gamsakhurdia, *Taboo*). Georgian modernists regarded the recognition of the circular time of the classical era as an opportunity for Georgia's national revival and the internationalisation of Georgian culture on the one hand and the promotion of pagan culture as compared to Christian culture on the other. Like Nietzsche, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia regarded Christianity as a religion of losers and wanted to replace it with pagan love of life and Dionysian exhilaration. Like Nietzsche, K. Gamsakhurdia regarded Christian morality as unacceptable, as it is "morality of the weak" aimed at defeating strong people and regarding weakness and fear as a basis for Christian love.

The prose of this period is distinguished by an abundance of works of small form. This is a sign of the beginning of Impressionism in Georgian literature. Impressionism in Georgian literature is associated with the name of Niko Lordkipanidze. He writes the story "Without a Sail", in which he sets out his creative principles. The author avoids detailed description. In his works, paragraphs are short, and he often uses one phrase instead of a long sentence. Here his task is to convey the general impression with mood. In this sense, Niko Lordkipanidze's writing style has much in common with impressionist painting. On the one hand, Niko Lordkipanidze himself writes that his goal was to evoke the mood of the reader.

Georgian avant-garde is often called Tbilisi avant-garde, because avant-garde and modernism in general emerged in the bosom of urban culture. Artists and writers from various regions of the world gathered in Tbilisi and it is easy to say that Tbilisi was one of the centres of avant-garde in south-eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Russia.

The first futurist soiree was held in the building of the Conservatoire in 1922 and a manifesto called *Georgia-Phoenix* was published. The manifesto bore traces of Italian and Russian futurism. The signatories threatened to destroy the art of the past. Phoenix symbolised the revival of the legacy of the

past on the one hand and on the other, was oriented on the future, which is absolutely natural for futurist aesthetics. Georgian futurists' protest against the past were mostly confined to their aesthetic position: "Electric light put out the Moon and the XX<sup>th</sup> century no longer sheds tears because of sentiments. We fell in love with a mob rusted in the emissions of vehicles applauding to the revolution in excitement. We fell in love with a noisy city flashing eyes at night with an arsenal. We do not stop in front of museums and monuments and we are creating Georgia's future that has no time or space".

To promote their ideas, Georgian futurists resorted to the art of performance. The first futurist magazine *H2SO4* was founded in Georgia in 1924. *H2SO4* was symbolic, as futurists wanted to destroy old art with this acid.

Particular importance and stress was given not only to the content of the texts, but also to the visual. Great attention was paid to design in periodicals. They specifically chose the font and often printed texts in different font sizes. The so-called handmade books have become especially popular. Artists and poets believed that the author's handwriting gave additional weight to each text, and individuality was lost in printed letters. They often used different fonts. Punctuation marks were often omitted, and different numbers were depicted instead. The works were based on meaninglessness and absurdity. Along with new technologies, futurists praised cinematography. In this regard, Kote Mikaberidze's film "My Grandmother" is indicative, in which there are many elements of futuristic aesthetics. In this experimental film, the director predicted the dominance of a totalitarian regime in the Soviet Empire. That is why it is no coincidence that the film "My Grandmother" was banned, and Kote Mikaberidze was deprived of the right to make films.

Georgian Dadaists searched for manifestations of zaum (the linguistic experiments in sound symbolism and language creation of Russian Cubo-Futurist poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. Zaum is a non-referential phonetic entity with its own ontology. The language consists of neologisms that mean nothing. Zaum is a language organized through phonetic analogy and rhythm) in folklore. Attention should be paid to the use of so-called foul language by the narrator in *The Smile of Dionysus* – a novel by Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, which has its roots in folklore and seems to be close to dadaist aesthetics. "Azalagani: Zazalagani:/asrni: Pasrni:pasragani:/serustem: Khurustem:/ikarti: Mikarti:/alasmerti: ara-ghmert", which is followed by comments in the shape of an admonition: "If my speech is indeed incoherent and if I am a master of dark utterances, this is because this world is incoherent and dark," which gives political connotations to this passage.

Due to the loss of Georgia's independence in 1921, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia and his friends wore black national costumes as a sign of national mourning and protest. The situation has been changing since the late 1920s. The Blue Horns group has been disbanded and everyone will continue to work separately. Then Ioseb Grishashvili, a poet and historian, will write a poem with a sad mood, "A Farewell to Old Tbilisi":

Old Tbilisi! my goals

I don't have them anymore, if only I could see you in my heart...

It was decided that I should change my lifestyle...

Old Tbilisi... I leave you... goodbye..."

This is no longer Tbilisi with its artistic cafes, where creative evenings took place until the morning. The cultural life of free Georgia lasted four years. By the 1930s, the people who laid the foundations of the Tiflis avant-garde found themselves in exile and concentration camps. Many of them were killed. Paolo Iashvili committed suicide. Those who succeeded, like Grigol Robakidze, emigrated. Lado Gudiashvili, a famous painter, also moved to Paris. At that time, his characters still looked straight. Later, after returning to Soviet Georgia, he began to draw people avoiding looking directly.