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New Myths in Georgian and French Symbolism

The Blue Horns and its Mission

In 1916, at a time when European, namely French Symbolism was almost over, the first Symbolist literary group of poets, known as *Tsisperi Qantsebi* (*The Blue Horns*)¹ emerged in Georgia. The founding of *Tsisperi Qantsebi* marked a ground-breaking moment in Georgian literature as it became the first organised literary school with well-defined objectives and aesthetic positions.

It should be mentioned that symbolism in Georgian literature was, on the one hand, related to the name of Galaktion Tabidze (1892-1959),² in his second collection of poems – "Crâne aux fleurs artistiques" (1919) inspiration and poetic dialogue with Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* is obvious, and on the other one, with the order of 13 poets *Tsisperi Qantsebi*.

As one of the leading members of the group Titsian Tabidze (1895-1937) made a historical parallel between the Blue Horns and The Thirteen Assyrian Fathers (the Orthodox Christian missionaries in 6th century Georgia), just like these early missionaries had a purpose to spread and teach Christianity, the mission of the Blue Horns was "preaching true poetry" in Georgia. More precisely, The primary goal that unified these young poets was to modernise Georgian literature and restore artificially broken connections between Georgian and Western culture.

The Blue Horn and The Soviet Reality

To appreciate the significance of the Blue Horns, it is important to consider the socio-political context. After more than a century as part of the Russian empire, Georgia experienced a brief period of independence before it was forced to become one of the members of the Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921. Although officially the order of *blue horns* existed till 1931, the active creative period of the group coincided with the short period of independence of Georgia - 1918-1921. With the establishment of the Soviet Union and after Socialist Realism was formed as the only acceptable literary discourse (1932), The members of The Blue horns found themselves compelled to conform to this Soviet context. Unfortunately, a majority of them became victims of the repressive regime during The Great Purge; In 1937, Paolo Iashvili (1894-1937), the founder of the group, as an act of protest, committed suicide; the leading proponents of the group Titsian Tabidze (1895-1937) and Nikolo

¹ The group of Blue Horns was created in Kutaisi in 1915. The magazine – Blue Horns – that first appeared in Kutaisi in February 1916 and the second issue followed in December of the same year, edited by Paolo Iashvili. Its members were the group's founder and mentor Grigol Robakidze, Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, Valerian Gaprindashvili, Kolau Nadiradze, Shalva Apkhaidze, Nikolo Mitsishvili, Razhden Gvetadze, Levan Meunargia, Ali Arsenishvili, Sandro Tsirekidze, Giorgi Leonidze, Sergo Kldiashvili and Shalva Karmeli (Gogiashvili).

² The collection "Artistic Flowers" is preceded by four epigraphs taken from Remy de Gourmont's book "Colors". Here are the epigraphs: Le charme inattendu d'un bijou rose et noir (Baudelaire); La demoiselle bleue aux bords frais de la source (Th. Gautier); La mélancolie des soleils couchants (Verlaine);...et les roses trop hautes (H. de Regnier)

Mitsishvili (1896-1937) were shot in the same year; Grigol Robakidze (1880-1962), recognized as the maestro by *Tsisperqantselebi*, emigrated to save his life, whereas others reluctantly obeyed the new reality imposed upon them.

The formation of the Georgian Symbolist group, despite what Soviet criticism may have claimed, was neither baseless nor merely an imitation of French or Russian Symbolism. Under the restrictions of Soviet totalitarianism, Georgian Symbolism was not able to reach its full potential, however, its existence as an original and distinct literary model is undeniable.

Dialogue with French Symbolism

"Paris, after Georgia, is the most sacred land. Let us rise up in this passionate and turbulent city, where our beloved brothers- Verlaine and Baudelaire, Mallarmé, the keeper of secret words, and Arthur Rimbaud, filled with youthful vigor [vigor]and defiance[difaiens], revel in wild and fervent passion"- stated Paulo Iahsvhili in the manifesto of the blue horns.

The desire to restore Georgia's cultural links with the West was deeply rooted in the philosophical and worldview principles of French Symbolism. Their poetical works and essays were inspired by French authors, especially by "the big four" of French literature – Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine. As Val. Gafrindashvili declared (1889-1941) *Les Fleurs du Mal* was considered as the "Gospel" for them; OR "I often think of Verlaine As of the deceased father"...(G.Tabidze);

By mentioning their names and texts, by referencing their world, dedicating poems to them³and translating their writings⁴ the Georgian Symbolists integrated themselves into the broader cultural dialogue and proclaimed Georgian literature to be a part of European Modernism.⁵

The works of the Blue Horns demonstrate the conceptual and stylistic resemblance with French Symbolism. Their poetry incorporates themes, images and motifs reminiscent of their French counterparts, including the notion of elitism of art; aesthetics of the mask; eroticism; urbanism; "aesthetics of ugliness"; cult of bohemianism; poetization of death (suicide); apologia for alcohol and drugs etc.

Modernization of the Mythological Pantheon

One of the defining features of symbolist aesthetics is the reconstruction of myth. In this context, it is essential to mention the theories by Valerian Gaprindashvili and Grigol Robakidze, who contributed significantly to the interpretation and utilisation of myth within the Georgian Symbolist space.

For Gr. Robakidze the essence of art is intrinsically tied to mythology, that's why his proposal advocates a return to myth but not in the ancient (Unlike Nietzsche) but rather in Georgian, Caucasian mythology. The specificity of his theory is a harmonic combination of two incompatible mythological flows (Pagan and Christian, Western, Eastern, etc.).

Val. Gaprindashvili, one of the leading members of the Blue Horns, has a different approach to myth. In his seminal article *Declaration (New Mythology)*, he states the objectives of the Symbolist group, emphasizing a separation from traditional mythology. He suggests the creation of a modernized "mythological pantheon" in alignment with symbolist aesthetics. Val. Gaprindashvili argues that

³ *Tryptich: Mallarme, Verlaine, Verhearn; Poor Verlaine* - P.Iashvili; *Stephane Mallarme* – Val. Gaprindashvili)

⁴ (translated collection of Stéphane Mallarmé in 1919; Val Gaprindashvili translated Baudelaire, P.Iashvili - Arthur Rimbaud, Galaktion Tabidze -Verlaine etc.),

⁵ "Kutaisi dukans (taverns) suddenly turned into Paris literary cafes, where alongside with sound of the organ and Mravalzhamieri [Folk song. T.O.], the precious names were heard: Edgar Poe and Charles Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde, Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, and others"- Gr. Robakidze.

ancient and Christian mythology, determining the substance of European art, no longer resonated with contemporary minds. “Pagan and Christian mythology has lost its ties with our minds, and the poets sought the other subjects for their art. No one believes in the old myths, and at the same time, we desire the myth, we long for the myth” (Gaprindashvili,1990). In his opinion, the source for the new mythology was diverse – the poet’s biography, literary characters (Hamlet, Ophelia, etc.), etc. Consequently, they replaced the ancient gods with themselves and their French “beloved brothers” (P.Iashvili).

Both Val.Gaprindashvili and Gr.Robakidze, despite their differing perspectives on myth, shared a common goal of modernising Georgian literature while maintaining a distinct cultural identity by revival of myth within the symbolist movement.

The Myth of Opium, Hashish and Wine

In all models of symbolism, a reflection of “drug experience” is omnipresent.⁶

Psycho-active substances like opium and hashish were seen as a means of escaping constraint of the material world, unlocking creative freedom, and immersing oneself in an imaginary realm. “Surprised only by Wilde’s necktie, drunk with Hashish, the old, Persian smell” (Paolo Iasvhili *Self-portrait*). As we all remember Charles Baudelaire’s *Enivres-vous: Il faut être toujours ivre.... Pour ne pas sentir l’horrible fardeau du Temps qui brise vos épaules et vous pénètre vers la terre, il faut vous enivrer sans trêve. Mais de quoi? De vin, de poésie ou de vertu, à votre guise. Mais enivrez-vous* (Baudelaire, ,1980).

Despite the long tradition of the consumption of opium and hashish in the West, these substances were associated with the exotic East. While French authors may look to the “mystical” East for inspiration (Arthur Rimbaud – *Le Bateau Ivre*), Georgians positioned themselves as an integral part of the East. Gr. Robakidze stated much the same: “The East is amazing [...], and Georgia is a part of the East! And we should not forget our cradle. Western Europe is indeed valuable, but we cannot leave the East for Europe. It would be better to celebrate their marriage with a Georgian feast” (Robakidze, 1917). Indeed, The Blue Horns bridged two traditions by combining Eastern and Western influences – its manifestation is Titsiani’s words: I plant Baudelaire’s flowers of evil in Besik’s garden” (Titsian Tabidze *from the book Chaldean Cities*).

In both French and Georgian symbolist texts wine is of special artistic significance. Similar to Baudelaire’s *L’Ame du vin*, Kolaou Nadiradze (1895-1991) writes:

The night will dampen and soot the weary city;
I will leave the poisonous streets and, together with others,
will enter a café, I, covered with mist, I will find a place,
Perhaps I will be able to buy oblivion for a trouble.
(K. Nadiradze, *I Will Leave the Streets* 1971)

or

“Be what you want, black, miserable, /Life, I hold your reins, / To turn this hell into a paradise” (T. Tabidze – *Self-portrait*; Baudelaire – *Le Vin de l’assassin*). Wine and myth of Dionysus[daionaisis] is an inseparable part of cultural identity for Western civilization, which explains poets’ superior attitude towards it. Gr. Robakidze regarded White St. George Day and related rituals as the vestiges of the cult of Dionysus and he found traces of the cult of Dionysus in almost all regions

⁶ With the symbolist artistic space (Charles Baudelaire in French and The Blue Horns in Georgian literature) this recurring theme is linked, on the one hand, to the creation of the new myth of opium and hashish and, on the other the actualization of the myth of wine and Dionysus.

of Georgia.⁷ Unlike the French symbolists, for The Blue Horns wine was a sacral substance, the reservoir of centuries-old cultural memory and it is closely connected with the national identity and ancestral heritage.

The Myth of the City

Titsian Tabidze noted that “Modern Art is an authentic product of urban life, where the city has given birth to new imagery and laid the groundwork for the literary movement known as Symbolism”. Indeed, the city-megalopolis played a pivotal role in Symbolist aesthetics. “The theory of Symbolism came into being in Paris cafes” - wrote Val. Gaprindashvili in his essay *Bohemia*. Like in Paris, artistic cafes become also integral to urban cultural life in Tbilisi.⁸ The members of the Blue Horns were the key responsible for the transformation of Tbilisi into a multicultural centre, “Mecca of art”,

It was an outcome of their the civil and creative efforts that “Tbilisi overcame the status of a cultural periphery and provided shelter to Russian artists who had fled from the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War and it created an extremely interesting precedent of an active, multicultural, multi-ethnic Modernist and Avant-garde cultural area” (Tsiपुरia 2012 p.178).⁹

The city, in French and Georgian symbolist texts, is associated with disharmony, neurotic society, chaos, **alienation[elieneishen]** and loneliness, duality of beauty and ugliness (Les Tableaus Parisiens - Baudelaire). In the work of *Tsisperqantselebi City* is opposed, on one hand, by the village (symbolising purity, tradition and religion), and, on the other one, by Chaldea - the mythic city¹⁰. There is a version concerning the kinship of the Chaldeans and the Old Kartvelian tribes. By creating the mythos city Chaldea, Georgia is attempting to determine its essence and search for its roots.

The Myth of Narcissus

The myth of **Narcissus** has fascinated artists across different historical periods which gave rise to its numerous interpretations. Alongside with mythological and literary (generally, artistic) tradition of Narcissus. From the last century, the myth gained a psychological dimension, emphasising self-reflection.¹¹

In the Georgian and French Symbolist tradition, the myth of Narcissus was manifested in a different form.¹² The chronotype has been changed (day is replaced by night, and open space is replaced by a closed, intimate space – a room); Water, which unites Narcissus’s past, present and future (therefore his birth, realisation process and death) is replaced by the objects of modern life (window, mirror) which is explained by the discovery of the unconscious and reflect the fragmented consciousness of the modern individual.

⁷ attempted to find evidence for the presence of the cult of Dionysus in Georgia. In a series of articles published in 1917, *Cult of Dionysus and Georgia*, regarded White St. George Day and related rituals as the vestiges of the cult of Dionysus. In addition, he found traces of the cult of Dionysus in almost all regions of Georgia. "Generally, there was the cult of Dionysus in Georgia, for sure, but with time, the other cult was added to it, or it has gradually disappeared" (Robakidze).

⁸ Fantastic Samikitno (1917), Argonauts’ Boad (1917), Café de l’opera (1918), Qimerioni (1919) etc.

⁹ Zigmund Valishevski, Sergey Sudeikin, Vasili Kamenski, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Igor Terentiev, and others, The Order facilitated their activities in Tbilisi (arranging literary evenings, establishing their own publications).

¹⁰ The Chaldeans, who created one of the ancient civilizations.

¹¹ The traditional moralising aspect of the Narcissus myth (arrogance, punishment, moral, beauty) lost prominence, giving way to a focus on identity, self-knowledge and subjectivity (Johansson 2012:20; Strauss 1995).

¹² They reshaped the myth by introducing elements from modern life which added a new layer of interpretation.

In both symbolist models, the mirror serves as a mediator. On the horizontal plane, it connects the individual and the surrounding reality and it is associated with self-awareness and the exploration of the unconscious. (Val. Gafrindashvili's poems "In the Mirror", "The Duel with the Double", Mallarme "Les Fenetres", "Herodiade", Baudelaire's "L'Héautontimorouménos");

What if I saw you in the vortex of the mirror?

The mirror was enlarged – transformed into a sea of waves

And in its waves, my shadow sinks. (In the mirror – Gafrindashvili)

On the vertical plane, Mirror connects material and transcendental/other worlds. The object of the poet's pursuit is reflected in the mirror, for example, the eternal Ophelia in Gafrindashvili's texts ("Ophelia herself slipped out of the mirror glass." Val. Gafrindashvili, "In Firey Mirrors"); Titsian Tabidze – Chaldea, etc. ("Your Chaldea is born in the mirror of fire" (Gafrindashvili, "Titsian Tabidze").

Conclusion:

+Despite the late appearance and eclecticism of the work of *The Blue Horns*¹³, we think that at the initial stage of the existence of the group their work was defined by Symbolist aesthetics and more particular by French symbolism. As Val. Gafrindashvili confirmed "Every symbolist starts his genealogy[djiniolodji] from France". We consider Georgian symbolism as a model close to French symbolism, which shares all the essential characteristics and trends of the movement, however, taking into account its context and literary traditions, it acquires an authentic look. The uniqueness of Georgian symbolists is explained by the desire to define a national identity and renew Georgian culture.

+In the Manifesto of *Blue horns* we read: "There is no danger in the fact that Symbolism finds its way into our country from abroad...When the people borrow something from others, they pass it through their **furnace[fernis]**, using national **apperception** adopt what agrees with their national peculiarity, what has a close relation with them" (Tabidze 1916 with Blue Horns).

¹³ characteristic features of various Avant-garde trends, namely, Futurism and Dadaism, are clearly demonstrated in the works and manifestos of Georgian Symbolists