General Features of Georgian Literature in the Eyes of a Foreign Kartvelologist

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Elguja Khintibidze
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Abstract

This article critically examines Professor Donald Rayfield's assessment of Georgian literature, particularly his argument that hyperbolization constitutes both a defining characteristic and a fundamental weakness of Georgian literary tradition. The author challenges this view by demonstrating that hyperbolization was a universal feature of medieval oriental literature, evident in Persian classics such as Firdousi's *Shah Nameh* and Gurgani's *Vis o Ramin*, rather than a uniquely Georgian phenomenon. Through comparative analysis of The Knight in the Panther's Skin and Persian literary works, the article argues that Georgian literature, while indeed hyperbolic in style, does not exceed Persian literary tradition in this regard. The author further contends that literary works must be evaluated according to the principle of historicism - within the aesthetic and cultural context of their own epoch - rather than by modern standards of taste.

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Foreigners began to take interest in individual specimens of Georgian literature at the end of the first half of the 17th century (Italy). Georgian literature became the subject of more or less consistent research abroad from the early 19th century (the Société Asiatique, Paris). Since then some works of Georgian literature as well as this literature as a whole have often been the object of both appreciation and occasionally rather harsh criticism. A foreigner's view on the Georgian national phenomenon should always be taken into consideration. The Georgian public has never been indifferent to the attitude of foreigners to Georgian literature, occasionally developing into a polemic.

In the last decade an attempt has been made in European Kartvelology at assessing Georgian literature as an integral phenomenon. Noteworthy in this respect is the work of Professor Donald Rayfield, our English colleague and alumnus of Tbilisi State University, at present Professor of Russian and Georgian at the University of London. In 1994 he published a monograph at Oxford, entitled: *The Literature of Georgia - A History*. In June 1997 his extensive paper, "Strengths and Weaknesses of Georgian Literature" appeared in Number Two of the journal *Georgica*, in Amsterdam. Prof. Rayfield devotes enthusiastic lines to the strength and splendour of Georgian literature: "Nobody would deny the strength or the splendour of Georgian literature. The very fact that it has survived, and sometimes flourished, for some fifteen hundred years is extraordinary. Still more extraordinary has been its capacity to resurrect after regular cataclysms - the annihilation of the State and the massacres of the population that resulted from invasions by the Arabs (8th century), Mongols (13th and 14th centuries), the Russians (1801) and then Soviet forces (1921, 1934), not to mention the destruction wrought by civil wars and anarchy. One cannot deny the vitality of a culture and a

language that can keep in touch with its past, nor its richness in language and in genre, or above all, its idiosyncrasy, however much it may borrow from neighbouring cultures". Rayfield looks for common features in the diversity of the rich factual material reflecting the literary life of Georgia that could be raised to the rank of peculiarities of the entire literary process. The author's statement to the effect that 'A culture, however, has the defects of its virtues', and as seen from the title of the paper, he feels it 'necessary to talk of the weaknesses and the miseries as well as the wealth and splendour, to understand a phenomenon as strange as Georgian literature'.

Among such features the English Kartvelologist singles out one, viz. that 'it is a hyperbolic literature, which tends to exaggerate, to go beyond the limits of the expressible, of the intelligible, of genres, even sometimes of good taste'. The researcher considers the high musicality of the Georgian language as the basis of this manifestation. According to him, the rich morphology of the Georgian language, its polysyllabic flow almost automatically gives rise to rhyme. 'The dangers lie in the fact that such a language allows a poet to stop thinking - a dangerous temptation, since the language can take a writer further than he can see'. He calls this 'hyperbolic in sounds and words', which in his words, 'is the dowry which any Georgian poet enjoys'. On the other hand, in his view, "The wealth and anarchy in the lexicon is tempting for a writer: he (rarely she) can improvise. There are many lines even in Rustaveli… or in the poems of King Teimuraz I which, one feels, are inspired not by an attractive word or rhyme, even though the thread of the poet's thought is broken, seems to leave a poet free from responsibility for his utterance".

The sacredness of language - contemplation of the mystic in it – is, in the researcher's view, a characteristic of Georgian literary thinking. To demonstrate this, he refers to a well-known hymn of Ioane Zosime and comments on it thus: "…it seems to me interesting that Georgian writers have had imprecision (or control), and a tendency to say things whose consequences they

do not foresee. In the twentieth century, the futurist poets and of language, we get words that no dictionary contains, but which have a fantastic, feverish effect on the readers unconscious". The futurist Sandro Chikovani wrote Orchestrated Poetry with words that no dictionary contains, but which have a fantastic, feverish effect on the reader's unconscious.

The foreign Kartvelologist does not see hyperbolism as a characteristic phenomenon of Georgian literature only in the absolutization of the language factor. It is significant in this respect that, in his view, Old Georgian secular literature differs from its Persian counterpart by its own specific hyperbolical character. The researcher is aware that Georgian literature displayed the ability of adopting the influences of culture, the 5th–11th centuries Georgian literature, owing to its subjection to Byzantine environment. To prove this view the researcher refers to the fact that classical Caucasian in Georgian literary pieces of this period about Georgian landscapes (the Lives of Serapion Zarzmneli and Grigol Khandzteli being exceptions). The situation changed from the second half of the eleventh century, when Georgian culture was freed from pressure but, in the researcher's words, the self-representation remains the same: it presents itself in only superficially different forms. The landscapes and hunting and battle scenes of Old Indian epic, the Vikramorvashiya or The Knight in the Panther's Skin, and new Iranian, instead of Greek. The peculiarly Georgian hyperbole in the emotions of the heroes or the strangeness of the narrative, so careless of time and plausibility, we might even suppose these epic narratives to be translations from some lost Persian manuscripts.

The reader will find many enthusiastic passages with regard to Georgian literature in this highly important essay by Donald Rayfield, as well as some very interesting observations regarding literary facts or individual authors. Here I shall limit myself to this general feature of Georgian literature, seen by the foreign Kartvelologist.

No matter how peculiar the above-cited view may seem, it is noteworthy in the first place because it is a reaction to Georgian literature and has a very profound knowledge of Georgian literature and Georgians, view our national literature with a different eye that has a deep insight into some of its details but is so accustomed to others as to overlook them. Hence an outside eye often sees better.

On the other hand, the remarks quoted above clearly call for commenting by a researcher of Georgian literature.

To begin with, why are the Caucasian environment or Georgian landscapes not reflected vividly in 5th–11th centuries Georgian literature? Georgian literature of that period is church or Christian literature. The ideal of the Christian faith is the denial of worldly pleasures, the elevation of the saint and rejection of the outer world. In this world only spiritual values are real; earthly realities meet with approval only in so far as they serve this aim. That is why the entire Christian culture pays lesser attention to nature and environment. It forms only a faint background to highlight the saints' spiritual light, and more blurred and mute this background is the more brilliant is the radiance emanating from the saints' spiritual world. Georgian church literature is no exception. It is a good example of medieval Christian culture. The few descriptions of nature which we occasionally find in Georgian hagiography should be accounted for not only in the Lives of Serapion Zarzmeli and Grigol Khandzteli, but also in the Passion of Shushanik, The Life of David Garejeli, and elsewhere (though more faintly, to be sure). All of them have their specific reasons. Should we, in such particular cases, then it means that we have to do with some specific feature of Georgian hagiography.

Neither are there nature landscapes so frequently in The Knight in the Panther's Skin as to ascribe them to the influence of Persian literature. I would think it is the other way round. There are so few passages devoted to the description of nature in Rustaveli's poem that the question arises: Does the poet's restraint not stem from the tradition of Georgian church literature?

Ioane Zosime's eulogy of the Georgian Language is indeed a unique case throughout the entire church literature, with only a couple of remote and atypical parallels. Should the explanation of this phenomenon be sought in the lack of interest that Georgian writers have had in precision or control, and in their tendency to say what they think they do not foresee? The fact should be borne in mind that the Eastern Christian nations have developed literary languages which, and occasionally their characteristically pronounced parity of national languages with, and occasionally their characteristic parity with the Greek language. Shouldn't we rather pay attention to the fact that, after all, the Greek language comes to dominate over the others? In 9th century the national period commences in Georgian literature, manifested in political and cultural rivalry with the Byzantines and the Arabs. It is the period when Georgian national thought tries to assert itself by creating a national hymnography, developing a conception of the Georgian royal dynasty being a continuation of biblical kings, freeing itself of the church influence and so on. In this period we witness the development of original Georgian hagiography. A significant assertion is visible in 10th-century Georgian social thought, as well as in the messianic conception: the Georgian state is a defender of the faith and the Messiah, equal to the Son of God and the Father Himself (Trinitarian). How should we account for all this? By careless attitude to human intelligence and by the tendency of authors to say things whose consequences they do not foresee? Or by the tendency of Histories and Eulogies of the Sovereigns, who seems to have had no fear of Christian and Classical writings, not knowing that the Trinity cannot have a fourth person, perhaps we should concentrate on the fact that medieval literature, and thinking in general, is highly symbolic, that the words and phrases of medieval authors are not always to be understood in a straightforward, simple meaning. And when it is difficult to give a detailed explanation, would it not be better to make a mere statement of the fact that this is a period of the formation and rise of Georgian national self-consciousness. It

should also be borne in mind that this is the spirit of a definite epoch rather than a general characteristic of Georgian thinking. Another period was soon to arrive that would revise this trend of thought. Already in the last quarter of the 10th century, Ioane the Athonite noted that 'There was a great dearth of books in the land of Kartli', and he set his son a lifetime task of translating books from the Greek. In the mid-11th century, in his work, Giorgi Mtatsmindeli has the Patriarch of Antioch address Giorgi the Athonite in the following words: 'Though you are a Georgian by descent, with all other knowledge you are a Greek.' Thus, Georgian writers were well aware of the crucial role played by Greek culture in their literature. And yet this did not prevent Georgian people to imitate and adopt the creative methods alternated in Georgian literature that differ in the style of thinking, attitude to national phenomena and so on.

Is it justified to proclaim the Georgian futurist poets to have been continuators of the tendencies of Georgian writers, noticed with Ioane Zosime, to say things whose consequences they do not foresee? Shouldn't we rather focus on the fact that Futurism, with its specific conception, was a modernistic trend of the 20th century. Is this futuristic specificity a general characteristic of Georgian literature?

I find foreign Kartvelologist's reasoning, proceeding from the musical nature of the language, on Georgian poets making a fetish of rhymed poetry, or 'hyperbole in sounds and words…' highly interesting. I wish the researcher had indicated, in Rustaveli, in particular, the lines that '…are not by a thought but by an attractive word or rhyme, and the ambition of the poet is to exhibit even though the thread of the poet's thought is broken…'. In discussing Rustaveli's poetry it would seem better to indicate the specific line which the particular researcher (and many other scholars too) has in mind when saying is unclear to the particular researcher (and many other scholars too) that it lacks sense, for Rustaveli is a poet, many of whose vocabulary, tropes, and outlook are so far unknown. There seems to be a more important point.

With its sound, rhyme, rhythm, trope speech poetry occasionally does go beyond the natural, established meaning of words, and musicalness occasionally carry a different meaning and mood and, hence in a broad sense, a different idea, not contained in the ordinary meaning of the words of the relevant line. It should also be noted that there are poets, literary critics, and readers, who prefer such poetry of narrative, sententious, philosophical, etc. poetry. But the existence of such poetry is also a fact and raising the question of which is better is unacceptable to genuine literary criticism.

More challenging is the researcher's view with regard to the Amirandarejaniani and The Knight in the Panther's Skin, viz. 'If it were not for the peculiarly Georgian hyperbole in the emotions of the heroes, the strangeness of the narrative…' He even supposes these epics to be translations from some post-Persian manuscripts. One proposition in this statement stands out with its positive and affirmative form: hyperbolization is the specific feature of classical Georgian secular epic poetry that distinguishes it from Persian poetry.

I personally would find it difficult to share this thesis. Although hyperbolization is indeed an essential feature of Rustaveli's literary style, it is hard to say that in The Man in the Panther's Skin it qualitatively or quantitatively exceeds the Persian literary tradition. True, Tariel's bodily strength and military art is hyperbolized in the poem, yet there is nothing unusual here against the background of the Persian epic. Suffice it to recall Rostom in Firdousi's Shah Nameh. The hyperbolization of the single combats of Re Amirandarejaniani are not astonishing or unexpected against the background of Rostom's combats. The emotional world of the characters of Rustaveli's poem is also hyperbolized: Tariel's love starts with his fainting, the knights separated from their beloveds shed streams of blood-mingled tears. Many analogues can be found in the medieval oriental epic. Suffice it to recall the emotions of the lovers in Vis o Ramin by Fakhrud-Din Gurgani, an 11th-century Iranian poet. Ramin, too, faints at

the sight of Vis. The 12th-century Georgian translation of Gurgani's epic, entitled Visramiani, which – as shown by a special study (A. Gvakharia, Moscow) – is close to the Persian original. It reads: "When Ramin saw Vis' face, from his horse he dropped, light as a leaf, the fire of love inflamed his heart, burned his brain, and carried away his mind. When he fell from his horse, he fainted and for a long time lay unconscious" (Visramiani, translated by Oliver Wardrop, London, 1914, p. 47). Here are the hyperbolic images, with which Vis describes the flow of tears from her eyes in her letter to Ramin: "O treacherous spring comes and learn from me to weep. But if but once from me thou tear the earth will be laid waste. Such a stream of tears ever pours from me, and yet I am ashamed that I have not so many as I would. When sometimes I pour forth blood and sometimes water, when I have no longer these two, with what else can I afflict myself save plucking out mine eyes, for mine eyes themselves desire a sight of thee." (p. 275). Nestan too writes letters to Tariel. The rich literary images of these missives are inspired by hyperbolic speech: "For pen I have my form, a pen steeped in gall, for paper I glue thy heart even to my heart (quatrain 1270 – Wardrop's trans.). But is the hyperbolization in these words of a level alien to Persian literature? To rate the level of hyperbolization of the relevant idea in Ramin's second letter to Vis: "If I had all the heavens for paper, if I had all the stars as scribes, if the air of night were ink, if the world (of alphabet) were as numerous as leaves, sands, and fishes… by thy sun, not even then could I write half I desire" (p. 257). The feast and joys of the characters of The Man in the Panther's Skin and of the entire Oriental epic are hyperbolized. In this respect, the hyperbolization of Avtandil's song, I believe, reaches the climax: "When the knight's song was heard, the beasts came to listen; by reason of the sweetness of his voice even the stones came forth from the water" (947 – Wardrop's trans.). Ramin's song, too, is presented by Gurgani in hyperbolic images. However, at first glance, the hyperbole would seem to be more moderate: Ramin himself was such a good harpist that he took his

harp and played and even the birds were hushed for pleasure (p. 146). But this is only at first sight, for this would-be moderation is due to the Georgian translator's originality. As ascertained by Nizami, the respective passage in the Persian original is conveyed in the same hyperbolic form as resorted to by Rustaveli: "When ever and anon Ramin played the harp, stones would have come to the…surface of water in very joy!" (Vis and Ramin, Translated from the Persian of Fakhr ud-Din Gurgani by George Morrison, 1972, New York and London, p. 146).

In Rustaveli's poem, hyperbole is not only a literary trope or a literary device used in describing individual scenes. It is, in general, the style. These images of the ideal personages of the poem are hyperbolized. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the literary description of the love of the characters or their derangement or madness on account of love. By hyperbolizing love in this manner The Man in the Panther's Skin does not differ from Persian poetry but, on the contrary, resembles it. The mad and enamoured is a traditional personage characteristic of oriental poetry. However, there is a distinct difference in depicting Tariel as one in love, lying primarily in the choice of a relatively moderate, reasonable best middle course on the path of hyperbolizing love as madness, characteristic of oriental poetry. Unlike Majnun in Nizami Ganjevi's Leyle wa Majnun, Tariel's mind or intelligence leads him only to the boundary of madness. Rustaveli depicts a ranging lover faithful to the ethical principles of oriental lyrics of Rustaveli's epoch. The comparison of Tariel with the hero of Nizami's Majnun, he is not mad. No one considers Tariel mad (unless we take in the literal sense the cries of the Khatavians astonished at Tariel's entry into an unequal battle). He invariably acts as a highly intelligent knight in love, while Majnun's madness is not questioned not only by Leyle's father but by the host of Nofal engaged in a death-and-life war on behalf of Majnun. Neither is Nofal sure of Majnun's sanity and to demonstrate his madness takes him to Teimuraz's version, Leilmajnuani, once, when Leyle was being led to the mountains

by her parents, her camel, falling behind the caravan, came across wild beasts, with Majnun among them. Embracing him, Leyle implored him that they hide themselves so that no one could separate them. Majnun was inactive. Ultimately he said to his love: "While I was alive, I was not allowed to dwell with you. If there exist any longer I shall not be deprived of you in death." In despair he fell from her embrace and fled, living with wild beasts. Like Daniel failed to pacify the tiger whom he likened to his love, and he killed her. Majnun lives in the environment of beasts, all of them serving him: "All who saw this picture were astounded – heaven had turned a beast into a man, and a man into a beast" (quoted from M. Todua's Georgian translation). Rustaveli created new type personages of the traditional lover, to whom the aesthetic images of lovers in Rustaveli's poem lie primarily in the priority of the intellectual principle, which is accounted for by the Renaissance impulses of Rustaveli's outlook.

Thus, hyperbolization is one characteristic feature of The Knight in the Panther's Skin, as well as of Georgian secular literature of the classical period (one should look in particular at the specificity that distinguishes Georgian literature from its other counterparts, and its national character). However, the author of the article is well aware of this, as he notes elsewhere: "the noble knights of Amirandarejaniani, or of Rustaveli's Knight in a Panther's Skin, imbued with an implausibly hyperbolic spirit of medieval chivalry, are very similar to the sentiments of courtly poetry in France, Germany or Iran at that period."

In the view of the English Kartvelologist, it is hyperbolization that must be considered the feature responsible for the weaknesses and miseries of such an astonishing phenomenon as Georgian literature, for '...it is a hyperbolic literature, which tends to exaggerate, to go beyond the limits of the expressible, of the intelligible, of genres, even sometimes of good taste'. At the same time, what we today may call 'going beyond the limits...' of good taste' was the soul and heart of medieval oriental literature. The aesthetic style of the author's as

well as the reader's taste viewed hyperbolization as the cornerstone of the art of the beautiful. It does not seem justified to criticize the aesthetic style of past epochs from the standpoint of the modern reader's taste. Moreover, this attitude should not turn into a principle of literary criticism. Literary taste or aesthetic style is changeable, developing variously in different geographical or political areas and complex shades of different religious or national literatures. From a single vantage point the aesthetic style of a different period, setting, religious or national unity is often incomprehensible and at times even unacceptable. Suffice it to recall the age-related variability of literary taste within European civilization alone. The Sentimental literary trend prevailing some two centuries ago is unacceptable to a part of modern Western readers.

Each literary work should, I believe, be evaluated according to the principle of historicism - in the spirit of the period it was created, analysing it in terms of how it accords with the traditional position of its age and what novelty, if any, it contributes to the same traditional style of thought.

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