

Literature in the Caucasus

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Ter-Gabrielyan, Gevorg; Kocharli, Nigar; Khalbedia, Malkhaz

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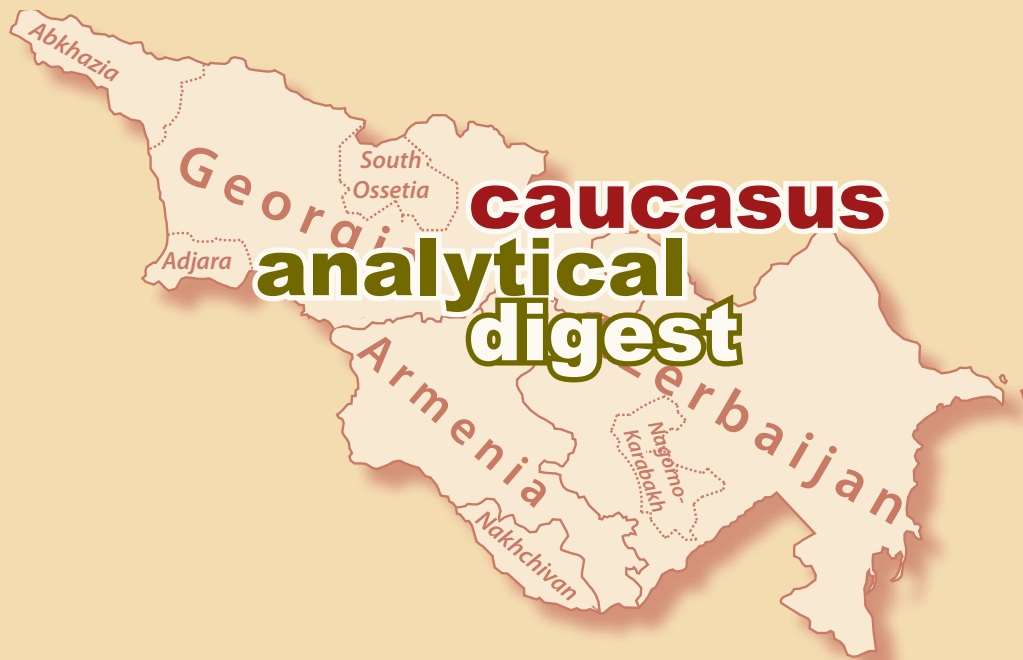
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The Archeology of Future Literature: Digging out Prose from Independent Armenia's History

By Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Yerevan

Abstract

Prose writers played an important role in Armenia's early and Soviet periods, with two writers taking important political posts just as the Soviet Union collapsed. In independent Armenia, book publishing largely collapsed along with a clear set of values, though writers sometimes found outlets in newspapers, soap operas, and blogging. More recently, a number of novels and short stories have appeared which try to make sense of Armenia's post-Soviet life, including defining its identity, dealing with the consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and adjusting to a form of capitalism that handed most of the available wealth to a handful of individuals, leaving the rest of the populace destitute.

A Centuries-long Contest for Power and the Writers' Pyrrhic Victory

Prose writers governed Armenia, just like the rest of the Russian Empire, from the 19th century until the end of the 20th century. They mainly influenced the thoughts of the public, but sometimes their lives as well. Abovyan, Raffi and Nar-Dos, the big names of Eastern Armenian literature in the 19th century, built the modern nation. They took the torch from ancient and medieval writers, who kept Armenia's language and identity alive, despite the lack of statehood for a millennium. Their function was the same as that of their great Russian contemporaries, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, or Chekhov: they were the camertone ("tuning fork") of ethics, the criterion of values. The other function of these two groups also coincided: to fill the gap left by the absence of an outspoken positivist social science community or secular philosophers. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, prose writers became the nightmare of the rulers and their main shooting target. The rulers were scared of any ethics, values, or thinking about the meaning of life that they did not control. This fear led Stalin's Soviet Union to exterminate writers. The great Armenian writers Charents, Bakunts, and Thothovents perished. Prose was crucified and sanctified.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, prose writers started to make trouble again all over the Soviet Union. In Armenia, alongside such important writers of the 60s and 70s as Pertj Zeytuntsyan, Aghassi Ayvazyan, Vahagn and Vardan Grigoryan, the phenomenon of Hrant Matevosyan took shape. Hrant did something that others in Soviet literature failed to do: he became a talented published author of international renown who could speak freely with almost no limits imposed by Soviet censorship. He interweaved the freedom of expression and an

uncompromising search for human values with a deep internal acceptance of the Soviet system. He regarded that system as a last refuge for the Armenians, who otherwise would be slaughtered, being surrounded by unfriendly nations and already suffering in the aftermath of the 1915 Genocide.

Thus writers secretly continued to govern Soviet Armenia—and the rest of the Socialist camp for that matter—even during the 1968–85 period of stagnation. Many of the writers were dissidents, like Solzhenitsyn. Their prose amounted to a step-by-step dismantling of the system. They were arrested or deported, but the rulers, lacking Stalin's iron will, were afraid to kill them. Then these writers came to power literally, in some cases via bloodless revolutions, such as Vaclav Havel in Prague, and in some cases in the midst of bloody wars, such as Vano Siradegyan and Vazgen Sargsyan in the Armenia of the Karabakh war. Siradegyan, Hrant's main pupil, was one of the 13 "Karabakh Committee" members who came to power in 1990 after the Communist collapse. For many years he served as interior minister, then mayor of Yerevan. The other talented writer, Vazgen Sargsyan, became the commander-in-chief. In the maelstrom of political life, they ceased writing. Hrant died from his inability to adjust to the new realities, without publishing anything new after 1984. He said long before dying that prose, in his opinion, had been overthrown forever. Vano and Vazgen failed to govern with as much talent as they wrote. Although Armenia won the hot stage of the war, a million Armenians left their country in flight from the cold and darkness, which befell Armenia when the Soviet economic infrastructure collapsed and Azerbaijan and Turkey imposed a blockade because of the Karabakh conflict. A major part of the population lost hope that they could survive in their homeland. Some

of them became writers away from home, writing in French, English or Russian.

Independence: Away with Prose?

Vazgen was killed in 1999 when a terrorist group entered the parliament building and shot several officials. Vano left office with the first president, Levon Ter-Petrossyan, and became a fugitive. They were not the only writers, but their fate was indicative for the rest of the prose establishment. By 2000, no one had published any serious prose in several years. Theater and poetry were also in a sorry state.

Newspapers flourished, and many potential and actual writers contributed to them. Despite on-going censorship the papers were and remain much freer than they were in Soviet times. TV started to produce and broadcast soap-operas—another refuge for erstwhile prose writers.

But, the bookstores became nightclubs. In Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city and the former cultural capital of the country, there is no bookstore today. People began selling their book collections for a pittance, together with the bookcases. For a select elite who had access to the internet, blogging became another way of producing and enjoying something which might, from time to time, resemble prose. Overall, however, it seemed that the populace stopped reading modern Armenian prose.

The remaining prose writers split into two camps: some of them maintained their ties to the Union of Writers, a Soviet heritage organization that publishes two-three literary journals for a small audience, with 2–4 issues appearing annually. Others, joining various post-modern artists, rejected the ancient hierarchies cherished by the Union of Writers. They socialize in literary clubs, which, if they are unusually lucky and are able to find some financing, may sometimes publish journals, on paper or virtually. They claim that art is politics and action, but the action of their prose is often invisible. If it is visible, the rulers crush them. Armenia's postmodern culture has no criteria defining what is high culture and what is low, what is popular and what is elite, what is good writing and what is not. Everything is writing, everything is action, everything is happening, everything is crushed if declares political aims. Members of the Union of Writers in the opposing camp still claim to discern prose from graphomania, but their problem is that many of them still write in an antediluvian style, aloof from the changed realities, secluded in their self-enclosed professional cocoons with no feedback from the larger outside world. The few remaining bookstores became flooded with a flurry of tomes from self-pub-

lished writers, whose prose is virtually unreadable and certainly unmarketable. According to the new rules of the market economy, anybody with money could publish a book. The problem, as ancient as mankind, was that those who were capable of writing good prose did not have money. Thus, they almost did not write.

Newspaper essays and blogs are, of course, a fertile “grassroots breeding ground” for prose. However, the lack of prose was not only due to the absence of money and support for prose-writers. It also was a result of the crisis in values: the victory in the hot stage of the war with Azerbaijan did not result in any noticeable progress. The conflict remains unresolved. While the lights and the heat are more or less back on in Armenia thanks to imported Russian gas, very few migrants have returned, the borders are still mostly closed, and the economy is embryonic. Democracy has gone almost as far backwards as it could, and the nation has yet to define its *raison-d'être*. To be sure, the Diaspora writers were finally published in Armenia. Whatever prose of the 19th and 20th centuries that was prohibited or unknown during Soviet times has by now been published or republished. The Eastern Armenian language, thanks to the new needs for rhetoric in newspapers, TV, elections and rallies, made a leap forward, reuniting with its sibling—the Western Armenian language, that of the modern day Diaspora. This was the language of the Ottoman Empire Armenians, who suffered from the Genocide. They had great writers too, such as Zohrab and Varujan. Their successors are the Diaspora writers, including those who did not write in their ancestral tongue, such as William Saroyan and Michael Arlen, and many of those who continue writing in it.

The Seeds of Reawakening

Within the last decade, prose has suddenly come back to life. In 2003, two new short stories by the still fugitive Vano Siradegyan started to circulate on the web. One of them was about a retired general in a strange foreign country. In contrast to Gabriel Garcia Marquez with his Colonel, Vano could now write about a retired fugitive general relying on his own personal experience. These stories demonstrated that Vano's ability to write is still much greater than his talent for political leadership. There are rumors that he has published a thick new book. Vazgen, of course, cannot publish anything new since he is dead. However, a volume of his political speeches appeared recently and they still may work to inspire soldiers forward in battle. Vahagn Grigoryan, almost the last survivor of the 1970s cohort, has published two novels and some short stories.

New names have also begun to appear. Levon Khechoyan, Vahram Martirosyan, Armen Shekoyan and Gurgen Khanjyan have gained recognition as modern day prose-writers and are frequently mentioned among small circles of specialists. In a 2003 book *Caucasus Writers on Wars*, which was a unique anthology in Russian of texts by Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian writers, several short stories described aspects of the Karabakh war. One of them, by Susanna Harutyunyan, followed a hitchhiking woman who stops a truck driving along the road away from the war zone to a more peaceful area. The driver wants to make love to her, she runs away, but he catches her and satisfies himself. When they are lying in the grass under the spring sunshine afterwards, he says “We should hurry, otherwise they will start smelling.” “Who are they?” asks the woman lazily. “The dead bodies,” he says. She stands and runs away from him. He calls after her: “Come back, there’s no way you’ll get another ride,” and like a beaten dog, she returns and climbs into the cabin next to him, where the strange, slightly sour stench of the dead bodies from the back of the truck is gradually getting stronger.

In the Lori region, home to many writers and poets including Tumanyan, a defining figure of the last two centuries, as well as Hrant and Vano, a literary movement survived. Recently young writers from Lori published a book, certifying that prose writing is something that almost every Lori youngster does, at least until the moment they have to start earning a living. Then they mostly leave the country or give up their talent.

The “Inkhmagir” alternative journal, managed by writer and publicist Violet Grigoryan, established a literary salon and sponsored a variety of events. They discovered Lusine Vayachyan, a young woman who wrote a novel about her sexual experiences with Russian and Armenian men in Russia. Mostly a tale of suffering and tragedy, this autobiography is a talented first work that employs street language with a relentless supply of profanities. In provincial Armenia if a woman writes about sex, her relatives, friends and the public still ostracize her. But Lusine does not care.

Inkhmagir no longer appears, but a literary prize bearing its name (which translates as “autograph”) carries on its tradition. The first winner of the prize was a blogger using the nickname Dorian. He wrote a story about a young man who is seduced by a rich man into becoming a homosexual—and suffers because he feels that he enjoys it, while hating the fact that he was seduced for reasons of poverty.

In 2007, on the eve of the country’s presidential elections, Ter-Petrosyan, Armenia’s first president, declared

that he was going to seek the office again in order to challenge the mafia-type clientilistic autocracy that Armenia had become. Over ten years in seclusion, after leaving office and before launching his new bid, he studied Crusader works in medieval French about Armenian culture and history. Before returning to modern politics, he published a huge volume detailing his findings. During his campaign he delivered speeches which told the recent history of Armenia in an unprecedented way, connecting the dots between the news on TV and back-room deals which redistributed power and assets, transforming Armenia into a country governed by a cabal of corrupt oligarchs. In the wake of his electoral defeat, the authorities crushed his movement on March 1, 2008, killing ten people as they protested election irregularities on the street. His speeches have a definite publicist prose quality. Although they do not conceal Ter-Petrosyan’s thirst for power, they brought into the domestic Armenian discourse much desired ethical standards, including the criterion of human values, and became another bone in the skeleton around which the identity of a modern democratic prose could be recast and rebuilt. People started to read, newspapers and blogs, first of all, but they are not going to stop there: if there is good prose published and if it reaches the bookstores, including in the provinces, they will read it. A businessman with literary ambitions is entertaining ideas about making a bestseller novel into a film, or vice versa. He even supported a seminar on “How to write a bestseller in Armenia.” But this is hardly a promising project.

The Talent of Small Things

More realistically, it will be possible to discover the little jewels and gems buried in the broader mass of literary raw material and let the world know about them, as the Inkhmagir Award does. Hopefully, one day they will give birth to a new generation of talented novels, which will not be aborted or silenced.

Good prose helps us to at least register, if not make sense of what seems incomprehensible in life, regardless of which camp publishes it. Two recent stories demonstrate this. In the Writer Union’s journal, Susanna Harutyunyan writes about her heroine’s uncle, who was a powerful corrupt regional communist leader. At one point, he almost bought Karabakh from Brezhnev while plying him with the famed rainbow trout of Lake Sevan and Armenia’s famous cognac. Now only his left side survives while his right side is dead after a stroke. He wants people to visit him, and the heroine does visit. He is touched, whereas she does not know how to deal with his life experiences.

Similarly Karen Antashyan, a winner of the Inkhnagir jury special prize, writes about a taxi driver who wanted to immolate himself, his wife and his apartment at midnight but could not find any matches. He ran away with a little fish in his pocket (the fish had died in the aquarium), in order to bury it, and came upon a street dog attacking a prostitute. He threw the fish at the dog and the dog, surprised, ran away. The prostitute has his mother's name. He, just like Susanna's heroine, does not know how to comprehend all these events.

When people produce readable prose from the things they do not know what to do with, it provides promising

ground for a serious reevaluation of life, which is the heart of good prose. Perhaps imaginative literature will once again govern thoughts in Armenia, despite years of war and poverty. Certainly when it achieved independence, Armenia did not dream of becoming nothing more than a community mired in outdated cheap consumerism, much less a remote province of the world, ruled by oligarchs, where lack of achievement is habitually justified by an inability to overcome the postmodern condition.

About the Author

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan is Country Director of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) in Yerevan. He also publishes in Armenian, English and Russian. The views in this article do not necessarily represent the views of EPF.

The Business of Literature in Azerbaijan

By Nigar Kocharli, Baku

Abstract

Book publishing in Azerbaijan currently faces a number of challenges, ranging from the small market inside the country to the changes in the alphabet in recent years. Despite the dramatic decline in bookstores since Soviet times, books by young authors who address a wide range of topics are now growing increasingly popular. Additionally, a new book contest is helping to revive interest in literature among the general public.

Local Publishers Don't Serve the Market

In Soviet times there were about 200 bookstores in Azerbaijan, with more than 100 just in the capital city of Baku. Now there are only 10 bookstores in downtown Baku and virtually no bookstores outside the capital at all. Ironically, 85–90 percent of books sold in Azerbaijan's bookstores are in Russian and are imported from Russia. Only 7–8 percent are in Azerbaijani, while the rest are in Turkish or English.

According to a March 2010 survey conducted among 783 customers of the Ali and Nino Bookstore, 73 percent of customers are women, and only 27 percent are men. The most frequent book buyers are young people between 26 and 35 years old. Unfortunately, local publishers are not aware of these statistics and the trends that they reflect. As a result, the supply of local books in the market does not meet the demands of this particular age group and gender category. Local publishers only meet the needs of 7–8

percent of the market, leaving most readers to rely on Russian imports.

Why is it that in a country with a population of 9 million (including 3 million in Baku) the number of bookstores is so small and the majority of books purchased are not in the local language?

Every year 40–50 publishers produce about 2,000 books in Azerbaijan. The number of registered publishers is about 90, though half of them are not active. The majority of these books are issued in tiny print runs – about 500 copies as opposed to the 30,000–40,000 copy print runs typical during Soviet times.

In other countries, the publishing industry usually consists of writers, literary agents, publishers and bookshops. The author writes a manuscript, literary agents sell the work to a publisher, who in turn prints a book and distributes it to booksellers. Often publishers help to promote the book. But in Azerbaijan many parts of this chain are missing – authors print books at their

own expense and then distribute them directly to the bookshops. The absence of effective agents and publishers causes many problems. In particular, it is hard for bookstores to attract attention to new books and the up-and-coming authors who write them.

Recent changes in the alphabet have divided the readership into distinct groups. During the last century, Azerbaijan's alphabet changed three times: from Arabic to Latin in 1929, to Cyrillic in 1939, and then back to Latin in 1992. There are now three groups of readers in Azerbaijan – those who can read both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, and those who read only one or the other. In 2001 the president issued a decree requiring that all publications be printed using the Latin alphabet.

Copyright is another problem. Very few authors try to obtain copyrights for their works, and almost none of them receive royalties for their publications. Numerous legal problems remain: there are gaps in the current legislation and most of the existing laws are not implemented fully.

What Azerbaijanis Are Reading

Seventy years of Soviet rule put certain restrictions on the availability of literature in the Azerbaijani language and those who cannot read in Russian had to turn to books published in Turkish. Thus, Russia and Turkey influence the market not only in terms of exporting books to Azerbaijan but also in the way writers practice their craft. The peculiarity of this part of the world is that authors produce work either in Russian or Azerbaijani. Both groups are producing good books but these two groups coexist independently from each other. Tensions arise among the groups from time to time when there is a debate in the society in general over the importance of using the native language versus Russian, which some argue is a language “imposed” on independent states by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Only a small number of books have been translated into Azerbaijani. About a year ago the government launched a project of translating and publishing 150 of the world's most important books. Among the 26 books that have already been translated and published are Nobel prize winners, classics and the works of contemporary writers that have attained worldwide fame. They range from Swedish author Par Lagerkvist to the American J. D. Salinger.

Only a few contemporary foreign authors have been translated, and almost all of these translations are illegal. Biographies of globally- and regionally-recognized political leaders, as well as famous authors such as Orhan

Pamuk and Paulo Coelho, are among those that were translated during recent years.

What kind of books are being published in Azerbaijan today? Azerbaijan is a country with poetic traditions and that legacy has a strong impact on the local literature today. The country is known as a cradle of oriental poetry, with such prominent poets as Nizami and Nasimi, who laid the foundation of the poetic traditions in this part of the world. Romantic poetry comprises the largest part of contemporary literature today. Some books also touch on politics and analyses of the current political situation can be found between the lines in many others.

A recent bestseller is the novel entitled *A* by the young rapper Qaraqan. It is about the fight against corruption and prostitution and many people are discussing it in on-line social networks. Fatima, a 22-year-old woman active in such communities, described reading this book as “rewarding and the first book I have read in several years that made me think.” Rashad Majid, the secretary of the Writers Union of the Azerbaijani Republic and editor-in-chief of the newspaper *525* agreed, describing *A* as “an amazing book.” “Above all, it is a book discussing the social problems of young people facing challenges in society. Additionally, it demonstrates that young people can use PR tools better than authors from other generations since Qaraqan's fans attentively follow his actions.”

Another bestselling book is *Baku and its Suburbs* – an almanac of 13 young authors writing in different genres ranging from fantasy to love stories. The book was published in a rather large edition and completely sold out in seven months, beating the records of the classic 1937 novel *Ali and Nino*, which was the top seller for many years. Readers avidly discussed *Baku and its Suburbs* in a variety of forums, social networks and media. The authors used all the new media tools to promote the book and it will eventually be published in Russia as it raised a lot of interest outside of Azerbaijan. Only a couple of authors included in the book were already famous and the rest are young new-comers who have never been published before but were well known as bloggers. Oscar-winning author Rustam Ibrahimbeyov highly praised this book as the first publication to bring together exclusively young authors.

There is a huge demand for children's literature in the market, but only weak supply. Books for kids typically suffer from low quality content and printing. Again, though, the size of the market is rather small. Normally, if a book with a print run of 500–1000 copies sells within one year, it is considered a good result.

Book Prizes

There are several book prizes in Azerbaijan, founded both by the government and individuals. The most successful competition in terms of public awareness was the National Book Award (NBA) founded last year by the Ali and Nino Publishing House. The organizing committee of the NBA visited six regions of Azerbaijan and all the main universities to promote this contest among the population. As a result, 265 works were collected from across the country. Overall, 69 percent of the writers competing for the NBA were male and only 31 percent female. The launch of the project and the announcement of the long list and short list provoked a lot of discussions and debates in society. The first reaction was not positive, but gradually the project gained considerable support and interest among the general public. Moreover, it has served as a bridge between the Russian-speak-

ing and Azerbaijani-speaking groups, the regions and the capital, and young authors and prominent writers who have been famous for many years. It was also the first public-private partnership project devoted to literature, with several businesses funding the book prize competition.

Authors who ended up on the long list came from different backgrounds: a young man who is serving in the Army, an obscure public school teacher living in a village, and famous writers well known to public. Even though the project is on-going and the results will not be announced until May 1st, it has already gained a reputation as the first independent and fair book prize competition initiated in modern Azerbaijan. As expected, this project has aroused interest for literature among the larger public and provoked a lot more discussions about books than ever before.

About the Author

Nigar Kocharli is the owner of the Ali and Nino chain of bookstores and cafes. She was inspired by the book of the same name written by the Azerbaijani author Kurban Said, which describes events when Azerbaijan was an independent country just after World War I. Even today the story presented in this book is relevant and people still relate to it even though nearly a century has passed. This book has remained a best-selling novel for over 7 years since it became available in Azerbaijan and is still in great demand by local and foreign customers.

Recommended Reading:

Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino*, Anchor reprint in English, 2000. The book is now available in 33 languages.

Conformism and Resistance: The Birth of the Modern Georgian Literature

By Malkhaz Kharbedia, Tbilisi

Abstract

This article investigates the state of the Georgian literature as it developed since the late 1980s. It argues that Georgia did not begin on a new path even with the collapse of the Soviet Union and that the country needs to conduct an evaluation of its history. There is little interest in contemporary poetry in Georgia, including even the “civic lyric” from street protests. Georgian literature today is infantile in the sense that it distracts one’s attention so that people will accept something against their will. Among Georgia’s recent literature you will hardly find powerful, rebellious, insightful, witty, or sarcastic texts. Another problem is the lack of effective criticism. Additionally, media discussions of literature are boring and do not attract attention to it.

Pseudo-Crossroads

There is an interesting book by Jean Starobinski called *1789: The Emblems of Reason*. The book is about shifts in artistic vision during the French revolution. It addresses the questions of whether the revolution prompted the changes, what the intersecting points

of the revolution and aesthetics were, and if the revolution was a watershed event in the history or art as well as in European political history. The book perfectly reflects the cultural dynamics of those times and the roots of the modern culture that evolved out of them.

Starobinski writes in the first paragraph: “Revolutions do not instantly create an artistic language pertinent to the new political order. Rather, the forms inherited from the past remain in use for a long time, despite the old world having been demolished.” Modern Georgia aptly exemplifies this train of thought. From April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops killed several people participating in a peaceful protest, Georgia has lingered at a crossroads that falsely resembles the beginning of a new road and a renewed life. In fact, the idea of such a new start is a delusion and nothing more. That is the reason why I call the period spanning from 1989 to today an epoch of pseudo-crossroads.

Georgian history contains no narratives and consistencies, but is rather frozen into paradigmatic columns devoid of any logic and reason. Our history is only a skeleton in which the powerful mechanisms of mythologems and constant recurrences are tugging at each other. In Georgia, the idea that one can start from the beginning is a mere illusion which does nothing more than force us to repeat history rather than analyze it. Perhaps that’s why we have broken from our history, and only its assessment and evaluation will help us to return.

Where is “Poetry” born?

There were a lot of changes in Georgia over the last twenty years, but very few poets remained on the scene to write about them. Some poets simply stopped writing, others lost their readers, and some left the country. At the same time, religious and patriotic sentiments remained intact beyond any poetry.

The venerable French poet Yves Bonnefoy in one of his interviews last year said: “Those who are enchanted by religion should start to think about poetry.” Georgia, by contrast, has experienced the opposite trend, as poets and poetry have sunk into near oblivion, while religious sentiment has grown to a degree that takes it beyond reality. By “reality” I mean being a real person with a unique voice, who has a true comprehension of his finitude and is searching for a shelter in self awareness. Undoubtedly, religion is often a shelter, but only for the masses, leaving no room for the individual, while “poetry never forgets the individual and perpetually returns to show him the peculiarity of his being”. (Yves Bonnefoy)

A different matter is whether modern Georgian poetry is addressing the most important questions of the day, and how desperate, insightful, sarcastic and committed it is. Articles are already being written about this problem.

Logically, the birthplace of the modern Georgian poetry should have been a city square. But despite the

fact that today everybody is deeply and actively involved in politics, this loud, so called “civic lyric” (from such “loud poets” as Zurab Rtveliashvili and Kote Kubaneishvili) did not gain prominence.

Even though many poets have been active during the last twenty years, (including Otar Chiladze [died in 2009], Besik Kharanauli, Zviad Ratiani, Andro Bua-chidze, Dato Barbakadze, Dato Chikhladze, Shota Iatashvili, Rusudan Kaishauri, Ela Gochiashvili, Zaza Tvaradze [died in 2007], Zviad Ratiani, Maia Sarishvili, Rati Amaghlobeli, Nika Jorjaneli, Lela Samniashvili and Rezo Getiashvili, Lia Sturua, Givi Alkhazishvili, Batu Danelia), it is still uncertain what place poetry can occupy in a society that is less and less interested in literature, where there is not much time for a serious culture, and where nobody cares about the past (or the past is used only to evoke apparitions). Even the so-called “intellectuals” are not interested in poetry. Instead it’s used as a shield by groups in whose hands the past turns into a lofty monolith, and poetry becomes a toast.

Literature and Reader

The major problem of modern Georgian literature is that it was not able to gain an active readership in the 1980s and 1990s. My peers, who were only 18–20 at that time, did not turn out to be good readers. Those who were reading the “modern literature” of that time soon became authors themselves and split the Georgian literature scene into odd camps where everybody who was a reader was a writer at the same time, while real, potential readers sat in front of their TV sets.

Once I shared my opinion with my friend and he told me that the main cause of the problem was the disappearance of the Soviet reader, which left a large void as a consequence. The void was filled by only a handful of books. In the first place, we should mention Otar Chiladze’s “Avelumi” and “Godori” (2002), Chabua Amirejibi’s “Gora Mborgali”, Jemal Karchkhadze’s “Dimension”, and the novels of Otar Chkheidze. But nevertheless the new era is unavoidably associated with the first novels of Aka Morchiladze. “A Trip to *Karabakh*”, “Dogs of Paliashvili Street” and “Flight over Madatov Island and back” were novels that bred a Georgian reader during the years of 1992–1998. Each of his new novels tried to address cultural shortcomings. His novels took a responsibility for a reader and were solely focused on breeding her.

Other writers were either replicating Aka’s style or trying vehemently to escape from his influence. Zaza Burchuladze possessed an ardent desire to create something genuinely new, since 2002 (when his “A Letter to

Mother” was first published), but unfortunately, it was not realized for the last seven years. Only recently, his efforts paid off in the novel “Adibas”. It gives an abstract of a new decade, with its precise, artful and completed form that is lighter unlike his other novels and the writer is reflected in it to a much greater extent.

Modern Georgian novelists of note are Kote Jandieri, Zaza Tvaradze, Zurab Karumidze, Irakli Samsonadze, Zura Meskhi, Gigi Sulakauri, Beso Khvedelidze, Zurab Lejava, Gela Chkvanava, Lasha Bughadze, and Davit Kartvelishvili. Some of these writers are creating elegant prose with ironic linguistic twists that is described by some critics as “postmodern.” Still, among them one can find those who poignantly deal with recent events. In the last few years, the Georgian modern classic Guram Dochanashvili is paving new ground in literature. Often published authors are Rezo Cheishvili, Guram Gegeshidze, Vaja Gigashvili, and Nugzar Shatidze, who died in the last year. His prose, on the one hand, embraced Georgian traditional culture and, on the other, thoroughly described the modern urban world.

Of particular interest are the women writers of Georgia, such as Naira Gelashvili, Maka Mikeladze, Ana Korzaia-Samadashvili and Tamri Pkhakadze. Naira Gelashvili’s new novel published at the end of 2009 “The First Two Circles...” can be easily regarded as one of the most ambitious projects of the last 20 years. It’s an 800 page book written in a bizarre manner describing the fate of “the Translators’ Guild”, capturing the crossroads period we mentioned above.

The books of the above mentioned authors are circulated in the Georgian market in very small numbers. The best-selling author among them is Aka Morchiladze (he’s the only Georgian writer who publishes a book or sometimes several books a year). Dato Turashvili’s “Flight from the USSR” beat all the latest records in book sales. It’s about the case of the Georgian young airplane hijackers of 1983.

Infantilism and Conformism

In Georgia the best-selling books are, generally, children’s books and some even consider them as a means of saving the other genres. If we listen to publishers, the profitable business of selling children’s books can offset the losses incurred by unprofitable products. But is that always the case? No. If you leaf through the pages of an unprofitable Austrian author’s low-quality Georgian translation, or perhaps a good work of linguistic research, you will find out that it was funded either by a foreign donor or the author’s friend, who lives abroad and remains devoted to his buddy’s talent.

Children’s literature is a profitable business; it creates an opportunity to sell books in large numbers. Moreover, those books are often published in Turkey or Hungary, where high-quality publishing costs half as much as it does in Georgia.

Children’s literature makes me think about the infantile nature of Georgian literature in general. Here I am not talking about the banal and infantile compromises that writers make. What is interesting is how the authorities use literature to prop up their power. They hide behind various guises and one of the guises, unfortunately, is children’s literature. Nowadays, all of Georgian literature is essentially plunged into infantilism. It is infantile in the sense that it distracts one’s attention so that people will accept something against their will (one of the functions of children’s literature is to make a child swallow the necessary dose of food, help her sleep or play quietly and not bother adults). This kind of literature only causes dilution, often engulfs us with apathy and rarely can be used for entertaining purposes. Among Georgia’s recent literature you will hardly find powerful, rebellious, insightful, witty, or sarcastic texts. Unfortunately, the pseudo-beatniks of the old and new generations cannot fix the predicament.

Writers about Writers

An equally painful problem is the dearth of literary criticism. Here, the problem lies not only in the deficit of professional journalists, essayists and reviewers, but in the laziness of the authors themselves. Among today’s Georgian writers, I can name only three or four who are extensively writing or speaking about their colleagues. If you read interviews with contemporary writers, you will find that they seldom mention the last names of the other authors. First, they do not read their colleagues’ texts, and second, if they do read them, they are reluctant to evaluate them. Others will promote and flatter only their friends.

I vividly remember that several years ago, one literary magazine that regularly published interviews asked several writers to name their most distinguished colleagues, and most of the respondents named the same authors every time. A correspondent tried to coax out at least one name of a younger colleague with three differently formulated questions, but in vain. The writer had certainly read several of the younger novelists’ works, but he would not admit to it.

I was always dreaming about the emergence of new methods for literary reviews and criticism in Georgia, which means that nobody would be able to determine beforehand what one author would write about the

other. Of course, nothing like this has happened so far, because no author is willing to write about her/his colleagues. On the other hand, if writers would review honestly, they could help their colleagues sell books as well as help readers to find books that interest them. Only in this way will literature not fall behind history, society, protest, or even anecdotes and jokes.

We should not forget that literature is a business for some people, and at the same time, it always rejects “rational discourse”, moderation and conformist comfort.

Process as Reaction

In Georgia, the “Saba” Literature Prize produces more or less adequate assessments of literature. Even here the shortcomings are apparent. In the first place, there should be more extensive media coverage of the prize. It’s equally important to promote not only the winners, but also the list of nominees, along with published interviews with them in various literary outlets. It would be a good idea to include insiders’ reviews and press reviews as well, thus, making them accessible to the wider public. Moreover, the process could involve roundtable discussions and questionnaires that could be sent to literary critics.

In contemporary Georgia, literary periodicals which publish the latest works play an important role. However, it would be beneficial to include more analysis, critical

assessments, reviews and information in them. Today there is an increased number of blogs, literary portals and internet forums which by all means deserve our attention. It’s very important to take into consideration those remarks they make about printed works.

Furthermore, more attention should be paid to the quality of translations which have an enormous influence on the creation of modern literature. We must take into account that nowadays, in Georgia, many more translated books are published than original ones, which makes this issue particularly compelling.

A whole different matter is print and broadcast media, which is the most powerful source for attracting readers to literature and which is so weak in Georgia that literature is associated with boring conversations about it. In order to change these patterns, it is necessary for the media and critics to assume an active role themselves and establish some order and classification in the contemporary literary chaos. The attempt to create order will probably be resisted and cause even greater chaos. But that is inherently good, because the one thing that literature cannot tolerate is classification. Literature always bears in itself the resistance to classification. A good literary process engenders such a response or reaction.

About the Author

Malkhaz Kharbedia is Editor-in-Chief of the Monthly magazine “Literature – Tskheli Shokoladi” and a Research Fellow of the Literature Institute’s Theory Department.

Chronicle

From 14 February to 14 March 2010

14 February 2010	Armenian law-enforcement agencies seize drugs and arrest three Iranians allegedly involved in drug trafficking over the border with Turkey
16 February 2010	President of the breakaway region of Abkhazia Sergey Bagapsh visits Moscow
17 February 2010	Russia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia sign a treaty on military cooperation envisaging the creation of a joint Russian-Abkhaz military base
17 February 2010	Kazakh Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairman-in-Office Kanat Saudabayev visits Georgia
18 February 2010	Three Azerbaijani soldiers are killed after an exchange with Armenian armed forces near the Nagorno Karabakh region
19 February 2010	Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri announces that Georgia's economy grew in the first quarter of 2010
22 February 2010	Armenian Minister for Trade and Economic Development Nerses Yeritsian says that the economic crisis in the country has ended
22 February 2010	Police in the breakaway region of South Ossetia set a deadline of 1 March for people to register illegal weapons
23 February 2010	Georgian opposition leader and former Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli visits Brussels
24 February 2010	Prime Minister Nika Gilauri visits Qatar
25 February 2010	The United States pledges 124 million US dollars to enhance Georgia's energy infrastructure
25 February 2010	A U.S. warship makes a port call in Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti
26 February 2010	Maxim Gvinjia is appointed as the new foreign minister of the breakaway region of Abkhazia, replacing Sergey Shamba who became prime minister
27 February 2010	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian pledge closer cooperation between their respective countries during Sarkisian's private visit to Georgia's Black Sea town of Batumi
1 March 2010	A Georgian-Russian mountain border crossing is reopened
3 March 2010	Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos visits Georgia as part of a tour of the three South Caucasus states during the Spanish EU presidency
3 March 2010	Leader of opposition party Democratic Movement-United Georgia and former Georgian Parliament speaker Nino Burdjanadze visits Moscow
3 March 2010	U.S. business leaders urge the House of Representatives to reject a resolution that would label the mass killings of Armenians during World War I a "genocide," arguing that it would put jobs at risk in the aerospace and defense industry
4 March 2010	The first leader of the breakaway region of Abkhazia Vladislav Ardzinba dies
5 March 2010	Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria reassures Azerbaijan over the opening of a Russian-Georgian border crossing after Azerbaijani officials express concerns that Russia could use the crossing point to transport arms to Armenia
5 March 2010	Turkey reacts angrily after the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee adopts a resolution calling the mass killings of Armenians in World War I a "genocide"
6 March 2010	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili orders the Georgian health ministry to test hair samples of public officials for evidences of drug misuse
9 March 2010	Opposition leader and former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli visits Moscow
11 March 2010	Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk visits Georgia
11 March 2010	Turkey recalls its ambassador to Sweden following the Swedish Parliament's decision to recognize as genocide the mass killings of Armenians during World War I
12 March 2010	Former Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky says that Armenia and Azerbaijan should not trust Russia to help resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict
13 March 2010	A fake TV report on an alleged Russian-backed coup and military attack on Georgia cause widespread fear and outrage in Georgia
14 March 2010	Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri visits Brussels

About the Caucasus Analytical Digest

Editors: Iris Kempe, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Lili Di Puppo

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Research Centre for East European Studies • Publications Department • Klagenfurter Str. 3 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: fsopr@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad