

# პლენარული სხდომა

## Plenary Session

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### **Georgian Literature in the Age of Transition**

Yuri Lotman distinguishes between binary and ternary models of culture, the former being peculiar to Russia and the latter — to the West. We are trying to define how this theory can be applied to the analysis of Georgian literary processes of 1990s. We conclude that cultural model of Georgia is binary as far as Georgia (like majority of post-soviet countries) almost destroyed its legacy – soviet culture, social realism of the Soviet Georgia; but we can assume that Georgia managed to return to its roots – back to 1910s - that was forcefully cut by Soviet regime.

**Key words:** postmodernism, avant-garde, Georgian literature

“The binary system equates evolution with explosions.. In western type civilizations, explosion only partially ruptures the layers of culture. Even where the rupture is significant, however, the historical connection is not broken. In binary structures, moments of explosion rupture the continuous chain of events, unavoidably leading not only to deep crises but also to radical renewals,” – Yuri Lotman, the Soviet cultural historian of Estonian descent said in his work “Culture and Explosion”. (Lotman 2009: 169) He described two models of evolution: “binary” and “ternary” systems. He distinguishes between binary and ternary models of culture, the former being peculiar to Russia and the latter – to the West. In the

ternary system, even the most powerful explosion does not shake the deepest layers of culture. For example, the French Revolution, despite all its radicalism, did not disrupt the day-to-day functioning of theaters and restaurants; conversely, during the Russian Revolution “corrupt bourgeois culture” was washed away. Similarly, even as the downfall of the Napoleonic Empire represented the explosion of a political structure, the landownership laws established during the revolutionary period would be preserved. This would have been impossible in Russian society, where an explosion requires the destruction of all spheres and structures.

At the end of his book, Lotman concludes: “The radical change in relations between Eastern and Western Europe, which is taking place before our very eyes may, perhaps, provide us with the opportunity to pass into a ternary, Pan-European system and to forego the ideal of destroying “the old world to its very foundations, and then” constructing a new one on its ruins. To overlook this possibility would be a historical catastrophe” (Lotman 2009: 174).

Now let’s discuss processes in Georgian literature of 1990s, having in mind Yuri Lotman’s theory.

The signs of striving towards the western culture was detectable long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the end of the 1980s (if not earlier), Georgian literature is trying to restore its broken ties with European culture and values and confronts the tendencies penetrated with quasi-patriotic pathos of the Soviet period. According to Bela Tsipuria, a Georgian scholar of modernist and postmodernist literature, “It is logical that, by the end of the USSR and in the post-Soviet period, when given again an opportunity for free cultural development, Georgian culture tried to synchronize with the contemporary Western cultural experience, reinforcing interest in European modernism, and postmodernism, regaining the experience of Georgian Modernism, and continuing the tendencies from Georgian Alternative Culture. As a result, Georgian Alternative Culture became the basis of the development of the dominant cultural area of the Georgian postmodernist cultural tendency in the post-Soviet period” (Tsipuria 2016: 518). First success of the 1990s authors is connected to the transition period, the period marked with the end of the Soviet Union and restoration of independence in Georgia. These authors like their predecessors in 1910s and 1920s, tried to combine Eastern and

Western in their works (“I put the rose of Hafez in Prudhomme’s vase / I plant Baudelaire’s flowers of evil in Besiki’s garden,” – Titsian Tabidze, a symbolist poet wrote in his poem thus underlining necessity of this combination of attitudes in Georgian culture).

Again, we should recall Yuri Lotman’s another expression: “It is no accident that, as a rule, the memory of a contemporary man records precisely disasters. In this sense, a disaster can be defined as “an explosion seen with the eyes of a contemporary man” (Lotman 2009: 10).

In Georgia we already have an evidence of this kind of disastrous moment. Galaktion Tabidze, one of the most important representatives of Georgian modernist poetry, wrote: “When Ilia was killed at Tsitsamuri, / a great era ended”. This disastrous fact heralds the end to an old era and the beginning of another era, the end of Realistic movement and beginning of Modernism. In this sense, murder of Ilia Chavchavadze – famous Georgian poet, writer, political figure and one of the founding fathers of modern Georgia, heralds a moment of transition in history. Grigol Robakidze, a theoretician of Georgian symbolism, said: “A Georgian killed the powerful knight of Georgia and, taking a look at his bloodstained hand, the murderer saw the face of Georgia. The Georgian came to feel Georgia and it is from this feeling that Georgian renaissance is to emerge”.

Three events in recent history of Georgia could be linked to a certain type of disastrous moment, marking the end of the old and beginning of the new era. All of them happened at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

1. On April 14, 1978, a huge demonstration was organized in Tbilisi in favor of Georgian as a state language against the will of the Soviet government to promote the Russian language. The Georgian people celebrated the first big political success on that day. According to Irma Ratiani, a Georgian literary theorist, “If we try to look for the beginning of the destruction of the Georgian literary discourse of the Soviet period, we shall of course pinpoint 14 April, 1978. That was a most eventful day in Georgian history from many points of view, including that of transformation of Georgian literary discourse. However, the end of the Soviet dictatorship was affected in 1991 and Georgian literature, as well as the political life itself continued to exist under a new status” (Ratiani 2018: ).

2. April 9, 1989. referred to as Tbilisi Massacre, Tbilisi tragedy. On this date in 1989 an anti-Soviet peaceful demonstration demanding secession from the Soviet Union was violently dispersed by the Russian Army using tanks and guns on the main, Rustaveli Avenue, in the center of Tbilisi, resulting in 21 deaths.

3. A tragic event in 1983 (controversial issue still today), when seven young people hijacked an airplane trying to escape from the Soviet Union. They were imprisoned, and a year later they were secretly executed. For a long time, nobody knew whether they were dead or alive.

Actually, these traumatic, or tragic historical events could be marked as the beginning of literature of the new generation.

The latter incident had a great influence on many Georgian writers (Irakli Charkviani, Dato Turashvili, Nestan Nene Kvinikadze, etc). Irakli Charkviani, a very influential musician and writer of the period, who chose the nickname “Mepe” (the King) for himself, dedicated his novel “Silent Swim” to his childhood friend Gega Kobakhidze – a young actor, who was among the hijackers and was later executed. The novel “Silent Swim” is a historical chronicle of the Soviet era, and at the same time, imagination, fiction and reality are intertwined with each other. “Silent Swim” tells the story of two main characters – the king Irakli and Rumi, a Sufi poet from the Middle Ages and their lives are shown on a parallel track. They are each other’s Alter Egos. Their fates seem to be intertwined. One of them is a constructive principle, the other – destructive principle. Time and Space in the novel is binary – everything happens in two dimensions – material and immaterial. Here we have the first complete instance of Dystopian world in Georgian literature. In immaterial world a life is controlled by evil powers and everybody here lives for 44 years. Suicide and murder are encouraged, because material world is temporal and eternity starts from transition to another dimension.

1918 and 1991 – these two dates are connected politically, mentally and culturally – transformation, reconstruction of the past, acceptance of the cultural heritage. In this case, reconstruction is connected to Avant-garde movements of Georgian literature, forcefully suppressed back in 1930s. In fact, Georgian postmodernism began like Georgian modernism. They both were synthetic – i.e. Georgian Symbolism was synthesis of Symbolism and

Futurism. Georgian post-modernism started as continuation of avant-garde movements forcefully suppressed back in 1930s.

It is well known that Modernism had various manifestations in various countries. It is widely supposed that “modernist trends emerged in the Western world in the following sequence: Symbolism > expressionism > futurism > dadaism. The situation proved to be different in Georgia in this regard” (Paichadze 2018:). Georgian symbolist school was ‘The literary corporation of the Blue Horns’. It can be said that Dada trends emerged within the frames of symbolism. Dadaist texts can be seen in symbolist poets’ works. As for the Futurism, in the Manifesto of Symbolism of Georgian poets, one can easily identify Futuristic trends. So it can be said that avant-garde and symbolism co-existed in Georgian literary milieu (as if Georgian modernism tried to encompass all modernist trends like an accelerated action plan; similarly, in 1990s Georgian authors tried to understand avant-garde, or the whole meaning of modernist movement).

So we can single out some tendencies: revival of avant-garde aesthetic; re-enactment of avant-garde; “enlightenment” of readers with the information about avant-garde and modernist artists and writers; the death of the author (Zaza Burchuladze, Aka Morchiladze), deconstructing old value system (Dato Barbakadze, Irakli Charkviani).

Even the word “avant-garde” appeared in the title of the very important event of the 1990s Georgia: Assembly of Avant-garde Fashion.

In Georgia 1990s started with civil war. However, along with independence obtained by Georgia, an interest towards western culture increased significantly. Despite a total political and economic crisis, cultural life revived. Grey and sad Tbilisi streets were almost devastated, but interest for alternative art was more and more intense. Poets, photographers and artists presented their performances. In the streets or grocery stores poets recited their poems, often of social and political importance. They were inspired by European Avant-garde or American beatnik poets. It seemed that Georgian artists and writers tried to take a direction characteristic to the pre-Soviet culture.

## **“Enlightenment” of readers with the information about avant-garde and modernist artists and writers**

It is worth to mention literary journals published by Dato Barbakadze, a Georgian poet, produced according to ‘samizdat’ (self-publishing) method, where along with contemporary Georgian poetry, reader could find poems and manifestos of the European Avant-garde movements from 1900s as well as first translation of modernist authors.

### **Re-enactment of avant-garde**

In 1993 an interesting performance was held when Zurab Rtveliashvili, contemporary Georgian poet, was elected King-president of Georgian Dada by majority of Georgian poets and artists. And the poet dedicated his victory to Grigol Tsetskhladze, a poet, who was a representative of Georgian Avant-garde in the beginning of 1900s until in the beginning of 1930s experimental artistic movements were banned by Stalin.

### **Revival of avant-garde aesthetic**

Musician and writer Irakli Charkviani, who co-founded a poetic order named “The Jet-Engine Club” with the poet Kote Kubaneishvili, along with literary activity, flavored Georgian music with European ingredients and created Georgian Rock’n’Roll, wrote a poem “Dada Lullaby”. David Chikhladze, a poet, who founded Margo Korableva’s Performance Theatre, wrote several Dada and futuristic poems, not to mention his avant-garde performances.

### **The death of the author**

One of the first novels of Aka Morchiladze, the bestselling Georgian author, “Dogs of Paliashvili Street” was the instance of polyphonic novel, while “A Trip to Karabakh” – another novel – was dealing with contemporary social and political issues. Zaza Burchuladze, a controversial Georgian author wrote novels: “Gospel According to Donkey” – representing a fictional evidence of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of Carnival, and “Mineral Jazz” – interpretation/illustration of theories of Roland Barthes, or Bakhtin, a masterful combination of Italo Calvino and Federico Fellini.

### **Deconstructing old value system**

Irakli Charkviani's poetry, which was completely free of bombast, would often find way to his own song lyrics; because of their simplicity, experimentation, and protest against actual reality and also reference to western values, his poems were of revolutionary importance and in them tragic elements and irony coexisted. The phrase – “forgetful ostrich of my past” metaphorically hints to the painful process of forgetting the past and accepting the change in the period of transition (“GOELRO”). In the same Soviet environment, where old values are collapsed, a neologism ‘My Jesusness’ refers to the search for solid foundation and is equal to Kant’s famous expression: “Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe.. the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me”; while another poem deals with apocalyptic vision of the transition period and the following poetic image: „Crucify crosses!“ (‘Race’), which obviously echoes civil conflicts of the period; and final lines of the poem become optimistic response from Nietzschean ‘eternal recurrence’ theory: “Spring will come!“ (‘Race’).

### **Scandalous behavior/writing (Michel Foucault)**

One of the most scandalous texts of the period was a small piece of prose “The Passions of the Martyrs” by Dato Barbakadze. What made “The Passions of the Martyrs” scandalous? Written in the language and style of Georgian hagiographic literature, it proceeded to destroy the system of values that was deemed traditional and cherished by public figures, who had not rid themselves of the Soviet mentality. The text was based on the author’s extensive knowledge of contemporary thought and philosophy and his concept of the colonial mentality of Georgians, and its explicit purpose was to annoy those Soviet-minded public figures. Barbakadze’s narrative simply provided evidence of his theory, illustrating that in the mentality of the Georgian people, sex and love-making are associated with captivity and abuse. He makes frequent use of the Georgian f\* word, although the Georgian word has a more negative connotation in certain contexts and it was defined by Sulkhani Saba Orbeliani, a famous Georgian writer of 18<sup>th</sup> Century as “the sexual abuse of women by men”. This is how Georgian society began to bid farewell to the outdated, false values of morality in Post-Soviet Georgia.

### **What kind of people were authors of the transition period?**

Actually, Georgian writers of the transition period could be compared with Generation X, the generation for whom personal freedom and human rights were of utmost importance. They decided to remedy the injustices of life. People who were born in this period – from 1960s to 1980s - were named ‘Gagarin Generation’ by Irakli Charkviani – in honor of Yuri Gagarin, the first Soviet astronaut. Thus, “sailing down the current, or against it” – frequently used metaphor by Irakli Charkviani, - is an expression of individualistic epoch; of the people who dared to confront their fate and change their destiny.

As a conclusion, it can be said that cultural model of Georgia is binary as far as Georgia (like majority of post-soviet countries) almost destroyed its legacy – soviet culture, social realism of the Soviet Georgia; but also we can assume that Georgia managed to return to its roots – back to 1910s - that was forcefully cut by Soviet regime. This is a question that should be resolved.

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### **Loving Books at the End of the Millennium**

My current book manuscript explores a contemporary cultural phenomenon and aesthetic practice that I call „bookishness“, wherein, in the moment of the book’s foretold obsolescence due to digital technologies, we see the proliferation of creative acts that fetishize the book. From cell-phone covers crafted to look like books to decorative pillows printed with beloved book covers, furniture made out of old books to earrings, rings, and necklaces comprised of miniature books, from store windows that use old books as props to altered book sculptures exhibited in prestigious collections to novels about books as objects, books are everywhere. They are things to love, own, and fetishize... not just to read. Bookishness is about loving books in the digital age, but its formative years are the period of this conference’s focus: 1980s-90s.

The emergence of the Web, changes in book publishing, political events and literary discourse propelled anxieties about literature (what Kathleen Fitzpatrick calls „the anxiety of obsolescence“) and the medium associated with it: the book. „Every generation rewrites the book’s epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit“, Leah Price reminds us. Yet, the particular epitaph that emerged in the 1990s, with the emergence of digital technoculture, laid the foundation for twenty-first century concerns about books, literature, and literariness—and its expression in bookishness.