

Paolo – the Fall of the City of Poets

Zura Jishkariani



Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, Valerian Gaprindashvili, Kolau Nadiradze

01.

I was growing up in several cities simultaneously and neither one of them was real. At home, in the shelter for refugees and among relatives bloomed a version of Sokhumi that froze during the war and we who inherited it carry it unaltered to this day. The school was in Poti, the city that was the polar opposite of Sokhumi: fully devoid of charisma, faceless and bleak, a perfect expression of those times. The only thing they had in common was the Black Sea, and that melancholy, typical of the cities by the sea. At school, History and Georgian classes would often touch upon Tbilisi, and the teachers were effortlessly cultivating our love for the capital of our country. The history textbook, for which I felt a special fondness, was equally a history of the tragic losses and heroic regainings of the capital. I had also heard that there is a sea in Tbilisi. And my Georgian teacher once told me that Tbilisi was the city of poets and if I wanted to become one, it was an imperative that I go there. Such were the three imaginary cities of my childhood.

When I arrived in Tbilisi at the age of 18, I found a hostile city divided in district mafias and spheres of power, with culture that was half-mafia half-thieves-in-law. No poetry. Corruption, nepotism, anti-intellectualism, bad taste. Even the sea turned out to be a fake one. The ones well-off were bullying the ones less fortunate, the ones in uniforms bullying the ones without, while themselves being bullied by their supervisors, and as I had no rich life experience I could only compare the situation to the history books and the situation resembled serfdom. Oftentimes we would have to defend ourselves with our own fists. The poets I liked I found in a damp basement, but it was clear to me that not only was this city theirs, it was anyone's but theirs. But I also found other poets, whom I did not like, and these had a status, press, influence, but wrote bad poems and served the state and the status quo.

Why then “the city of poets?”

This I did not know yet, because nobody told us at school, where we still studied with Soviet textbooks, nor in press, nor on the newly available internet, that some hundred years ago, for a little while, Tbilisi was the “city of poets” but was slain in full bloom, that its natural development was artificially and oppressively arrested – mass murder of its poets included – all of which indefinitely postponed “the setting of Georgian poetry to the global compass”.

02.

Since, after several decades of censorship and historical oblivion, the repressed artists and writers have returned to us, much of interest has been written about the cultural and political life of the First Republic, but in this essay I want to stress one particular event that greatly stirs me as a writer. What I am about to tell you probably took place in 1920, the final year of the Republic. It was precisely at that time that in its literary cafes, dukhans and salons Tbilisi was proclaimed as the city of poets, as the capital of poetry and as Paris of the Caucasus. This was an attempt to draw the world's attention to the city. Timeliness of this was brought about by a number of concurrent events, but the proclamation of poetry as the new Georgian politics, as well as marking of Tbilisi on the global map, with its new identity and new ambitions, was begun a few years back in a whole other city, Kutaisi, by the “Blue Horns”. The announcement of the year 1920 was only the final step of their artistic game-plan. This is how Grigol Robakidze wrote about the “Prince of the Horns,” the pirate of the city of poets: “That’s when Paolo Iashvili burst onto Tbilisi with the same force that Arthur Rimbaud attacked Paris. He did not yet know that Tbilisi is even harder to take with bohemian spirit and poetry than Paris.”

In this respect, the First Republic turned out to be that open laboratory where, at least for the shortest while, an attempt of bringing together poetry and the city, poetry and politics, the mundane and the poem became possible. Let us then try to follow the discontinuous trace of memories, diaries, manifestos, newspapers and magazines and it will definitely bring us to the “fantastic city” – in the ruins of which we might even unearth the answers to our current anxieties.

03.

In 1947, American writer John Steinbeck visited the Soviet Union and, among other places, Tbilisi. In the book of reminiscence, *A Russian Journal*, he writes:

Georgians take their literature very seriously: poetry and music are their great contributions to world culture, and their poetry is very ancient. Their poetry is not read by a few people; it is read by everyone. In their burial places on the hill we had seen that their poets were buried on an equal footing with their kings, and in many cases a poet has been remembered where a king has been forgotten.

Interestingly, by the time he is writing this, it has been ten years since the Soviet Union destroyed, suppressed and cast to oblivion the names of the Blue Horns, Paolo and others; but apparently the echo of poetic revolution still resounded in the city.

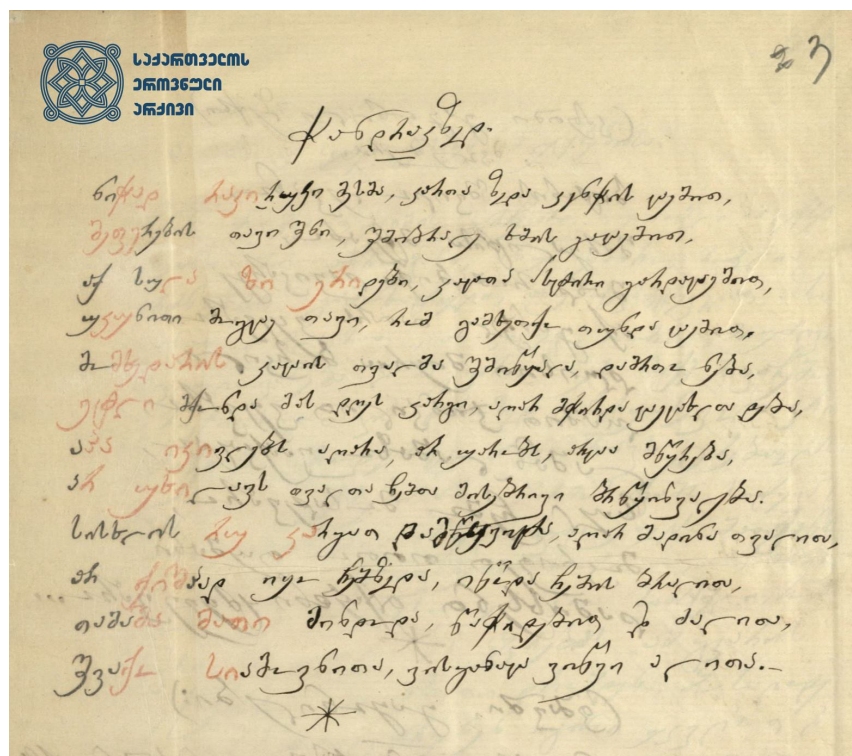


Robert Capa, Tbilisi, 1947

The shadow of a poet as a major archetype always existed within the Georgian culture; within this cultural context it is imaginable that the kings who wrote poems could very well be the poets who were forced to be kings. I do not know if the popular tendency, according to which every Georgian has a phase of being a poet, still holds true; it can be seen even in the case of that most famous Georgian: even Stalin wrote poems. The function of this archetype of our culture may be elucidated by the following statement by Steinbeck:

They are very stern and devoted, these Georgian writers, and it is very hard to tell them that although Stalin may say that the writer is the architect of the soul, in America the writer is not considered the architect of anything...

It seems that the Georgian poet has always vibrated at the frequency where the mere description of the world won't do, one has to change it.



'Chandrakzed', a poem composed of verbs by King Teimuraz II, which was copied from an old manuscript by Rafiel Eristavi in 1877

04.

The history of the Blue Horns and Paolo is probably already well known to most; the itineraries their lives took, as well as their poetic worldview has been written about multiple times and quite thoroughly, therefore I will attempt a brief analysis of the rise of the city of poets itself. I will also rely on the writings of the period so the situation I'm describing can be grasped at first hand.

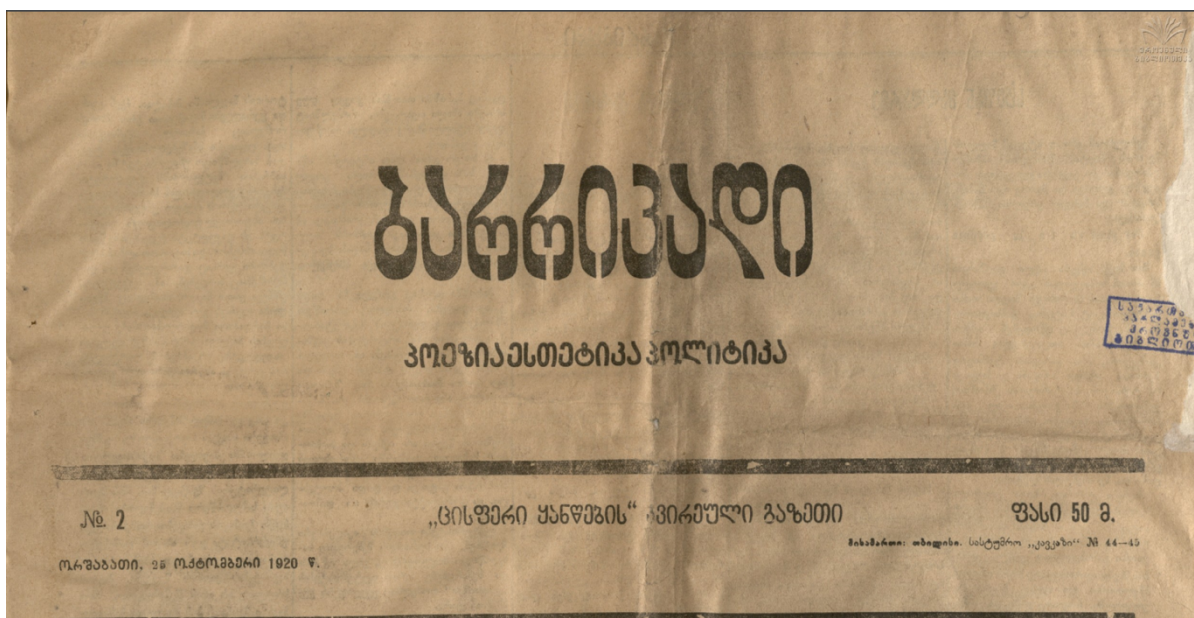
At the time of the First Republic (1918-1921) the cultural life of Tbilisi was extraordinarily vibrant and active. The city became a multicultural center where the “distorted and half-words” of Aleksey Kruchyonikh’s Zaum poetry could be heard alongside the bayati and mukhambazi; the city had newly discovered Pirosmeni, Freud and Communism and the people had newly discovered the city. The arts were not hindered by the imperial censure, and more than that: the Social-Democratic government was encouraging and actively helping the artists in organizing exhibitions, going abroad for studies, printing magazines and so on. For example, the city mayor Benia Chkhikvishvili – who by that time had already been a mayor of Sokhumi and the president of the Agrarian Anarchist Republic of Guria – was actively assisting Dimitri Shevardnadze in gathering the paintings by Pirosmeni that were scattered across the city.

Via “Barricade” – a weekly paper put out by the Blue Horns – the blindly self-confident Paolo thus announces the year 1920:

“1920 is ours...

We would roam from city to city like savage hoards, reanimating the desolate districts, we named Kutaisi the Fantastic City, we have brought the noise of the new horror to the streets and we elected Tbilisi as the Capital of Poetry. We have electrified the Georgian bohemian spirit and we have beaten and shattered the enemies of Georgia. We have established a poetic order – the brotherhood of the poets.

Enough of Georgia – we await the global resonance!”



Newspaper 'Barricade', 1920, Grigol Robakidze, 'Swing and stranglehold'

In the letter of the same period, the poet and theatrical director Igor Terentiev writes his friend: *“Was I to systematically recount everything that I have been up to in Tbilisi these last three years, neither memory nor time would be sufficient. In Tbilisi there are certain graphomaniacs who write night and day the history of Tbilisi’s metamorphosis into Paris.”*

“Tbilisi became the city of poets. In the cafe International it was even announced as such.” - writes Grigol Robakidze, the ideological guru of the Blue Horns, in his unfinished novel, *Falestra*: *“Tbilisi has become fantastic. And the fantastic city demanded a fantastic corner, so one day the poets and painters opened “fantasticheski kabachok” (fantastic dive) on Rustaveli avenue, #12 – a tiny room where 10-15 people could barely be fitted but by some providence there was always a room for up to 50. Here too: more ladies than males in the audience... Who was not in Tbilisi then? Futurists took a step towards Dada in Tbilisi. They started an organ “41 degrees” – (must be the sign of the temperature at which one begins to rave).”* This is how Iliazd, the Futurist member of 41°, explained the name: *“All the light-bearing cities – Madrid, Naples, Constantinople, Beijing and New York”* are situated on more or less the same latitude, and so is Tbilisi. We remember the famous photo of the poets with an inscription: *“decadents high on hashish.”* Hashish and opium were brought to the city by caravans moving from the East, bringing the Eastern culture with them, whereas the West, along with the Western culture, brought with it the hitherto unknown delights: *“Nearly all the guests had this in common: their thumb and index finger often touched their nostrils – which is probably because cocaine was common in Tbilisi at that time.”* - Robakidze informs us.



Hashish-drunk decadents - Kolau Nadiradze and Titsian Tabidze

The Blue Horns inaugurated their own poetic temple, Chimerion, that the Russian painter Sudeikin decorated and “filled with chimeras.”

“What was happening in the cultural life of Tbilisi in 1917-1921? Literary groups, unions and salons are established, they collaborate, quarrel, dismantle and reunite again. Gorodetsky’s cultural center, Artisterium comprises of six different sections, including the “Poets’ Factory” that he runs. “Futurists’ syndicate” reorganizes as 41°, probably the most radical leftist organization not only in Tbilisi of that time but, dare we say, in the entire world of culture. Only other group of the same scope would be the Dadaists, who realized similar ideas, but on a different scale and a larger area.” - writes Yuri Degen in the magazine ARS, 1918.

An interesting recounting of this vibration can be found in *Iskustvo*, 1919, by Vasili Katanian – a poet, playwright and memoirist, who later authored a biography of Mayakovsky – who was an active member of the literary life in Tbilisi, as well as the member of the crucial literary group of Russia, “Poets’ Factory”:

“Gentlemen! Tbilisi is turning into Paris!”

According to Paolo Iashvili.

Indeed, Tbilisi was an astonishing city. The city council, a tramway line, “kopek” society – in short, all seemed to be going well. But suddenly Tbilisi slowly begins to turn into Paris. No one knew about it and then, abruptly – like a nail on the head – you are living in Paris.

Now no citizen will say: “Today we are strolling the sunny avenue of Rustaveli.” No! With pride, hat tilted slightly back, yawning, he’ll say: Aujourd’hui je me promenais dans les Champs Élysées.

Whether this is good or bad, I cannot say. I simply want, as a long-standing citizen of the former Tbilisi, to tell the unusual story of the city.

Culprits of this sorry event are people who separately came to the city and gradually filled up every vacant spot and apartment, calling themselves the people of the arts. This was, at least, the opinion of Paolo Iashvili, who was the first to notice this strange transformation of our city.”

Paolo Iashvili – whose name is unfailingly mentioned whenever this Parisian metamorphosis of Tbilisi is announced – seen from the centennial distance, was not an unwitting witness of this “strange transformation,” nor did he notice it by “accident.” This utopian poetic project of his and his group’s was announced a number of years ago, back in Kutaisi.

Spring of the year 1916 saw the publication of the first issue of the magazine, Blue Horns, where the 22 year old Paolo, newly returned from Paris, is attempting to undermine the eternal hierarchy by announcing: “Outside of Georgia, the most sacred city is Paris.” Georgia that gets the primacy in these words is soon to be replaced by Tbilisi, and the cultural coordinates are to be recalculated. In the poem, “Tbilisi,” Paolo bluntly declares the royal status of the poets:

*City full of a thousand voices,
you are the royal seat of poets.*

In 1919, Galaktion writes of Tbilisi in the same vein:

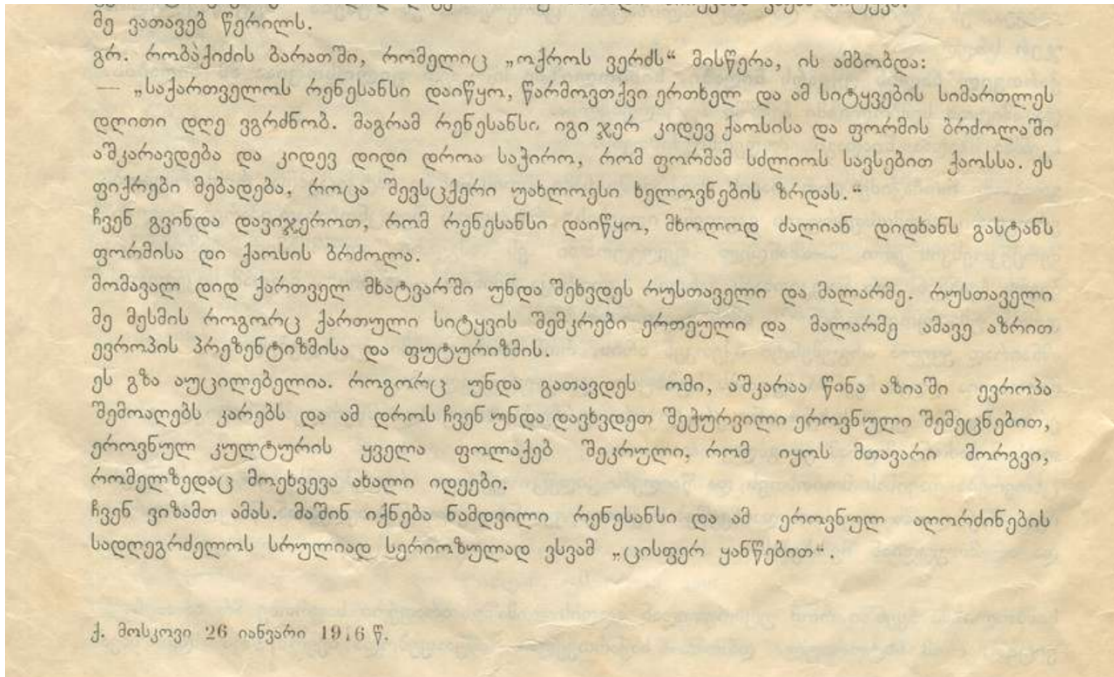
*Tumultous Tbilisi:
the kingdom of poets!*

For those who failed to fully grasp the meaning of Paolo’s words, Titsian Tabidze added clarity in his “Dada Manifesto”:

*You all need a clyster up your arse, you motherfuckers
beyond us is Paris...
Champs-Élysées.*

But unlike Paolo – who, during his few years stay in Paris, befriended Picasso, Modigliani, Apollinaire and Balmont – neither Titsian, nor Kolau Nadiradze or any other members of the Blue Horns had ever

personally been there, which left Paolo – whose love for the Parisian poets had turned into a competitive obsession – as the only one qualified to judge – did Tbilisi finally become like Paris? Or did it outdo it already?



Titsian Tabidze, 'Renaissance', 'Blue Horns' 1916

05.

But why the poetic project of the “Paris of Caucasus” and why Paris, Europe and not any other city on the face of the earth? And why did this comparison sound convincing in the context of Tbilisi? As is often the case with poetry, Paolo’s visions and reality were connected by a whole range of terrifying preconditions.

We must not forget that the fantastic city was, both politically and historically, a political experiment, a temporary heaven or oasis. The First World War was raging in the world, with its disastrous results; the Russian Empire was falling under the blows of revolutions and wars; the Republic that detached itself from the Empire, and was in itself a social-democratic experiment, was under a threat of aggression from the Ottoman Empire, and was forced to defend its borders: attacked by Armenia from the south, the “White” armies in Abkhazia, conflicts with Ossetians and Abkhazs. Despite the recognition from a number of countries around the world, and the Soviet Russia’s seeming acceptance of its independence, countries around it were being “reddened” at such speed and with such force that the threat of the “fantastic city” quickly turning into a pure fantasy and dream was real and constant. In 1920, at the height of the rise of the city of poets, “Barricade” (with “Poetry, Aesthetics, Politics” for a slogan) published a piece by Grigol Robakidze, entitled “The Scaffold and the Swing,” where he attempts to reflect upon the desperate mode of living that came to be (and maybe always had been?) around him in Georgia. He writes:

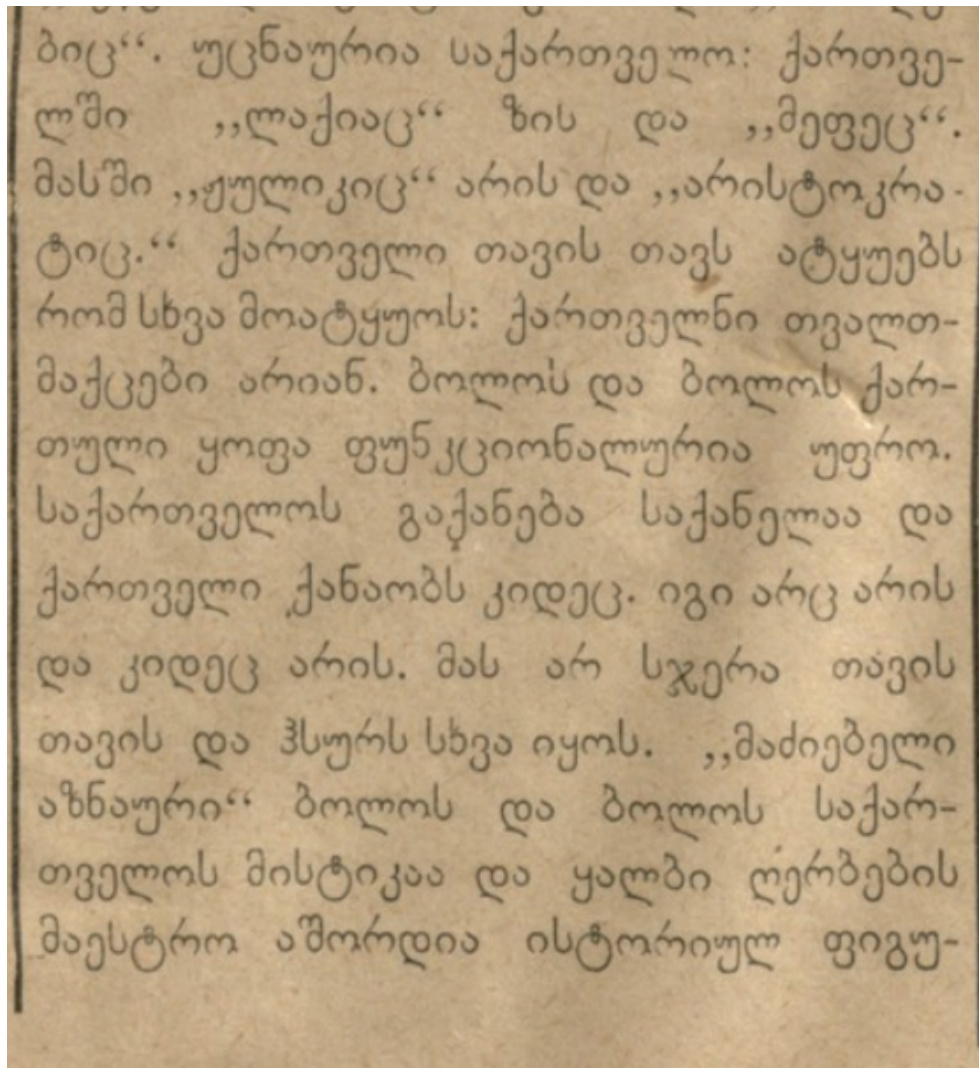
“The world is crumbling, only the contented in Basel fail to notice this. Is this a crumbling of uttermost cosmic proportions or a merely social one? In the end, this is the question of the intensity of perception. Nowhere has this crumbling found a sharper expression than in poetry and art in general...

...And what is Georgia doing at this moment? Everything is crumbling and in the throes of the world Georgia is merely swaying...

...A Georgian is deceiving himself so as to deceive another: Georgians love to make-believe. Could this be the function of Georgian existence? Georgian range is that of a swing and so the Georgian sways along. He is not, and he also is. He does not believe in himself and wishes to be another. The “searching nobleman” is, after all, a mystique of Georgia and the master of false coats of arms, Ashordia, turns out to be a figure of historical import...

...The world is crumbling, while Georgia is swaying, swinging like a yellow imp on a swing. This is its rhythm: a show most ephemeral and, to Georgia, perhaps most fairy. A prance of imps and a round of witches conjoined...

...Georgia is swinging on a swing, but it is hanging over an abyss and the swing may easily turn into a scaffold.”



'Barricade', 1920, Grigol Robakidze, 'Swing and stranglehold'

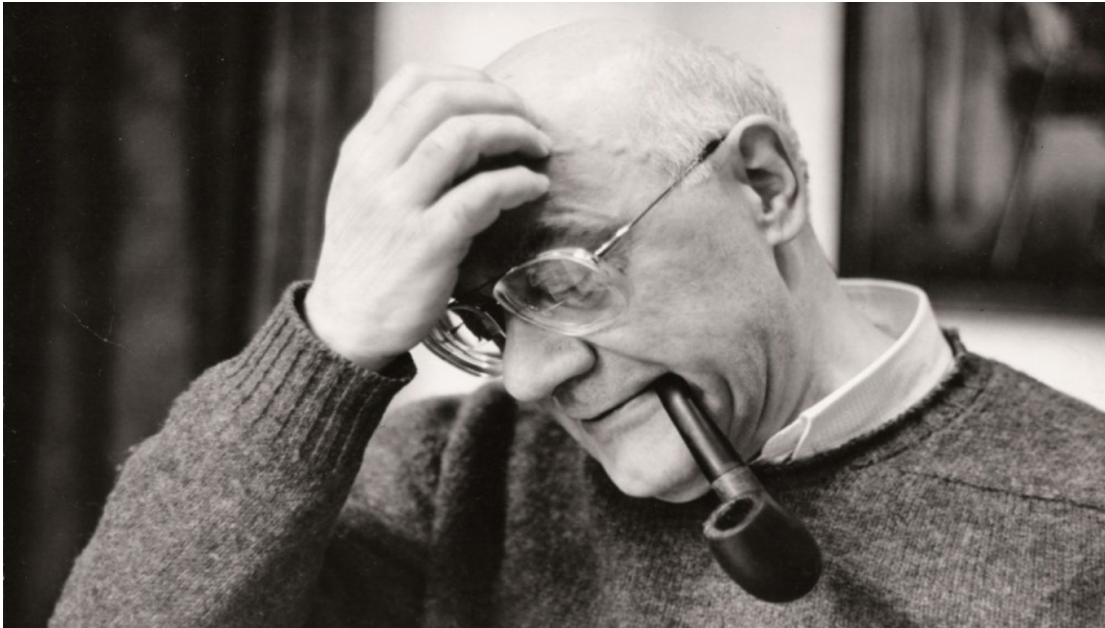
Almost a hundred years later, and in another context, in an interview conducted in Russian, the philosopher Merab Mamardashvili gives an extremely acute description of this phenomenon of swinging amid a global disaster and its century old practice in Georgia:

"...The chief Georgian value is lightness, a tragic lightness ... and there is one codified element in this. I would call it a joyful sense of tragedy ... picture yourself the culture of a country that, for centuries, has not only lived but fought for survival, has practically had no moment of peace since the 13th century, was in a constant struggle for existence and for its national and historical identity: how tragic.

Such a nation is tragic and so is its culture. But add to this one absolute prohibition: it is forbidden to become a burden for others – please, be tragic all you want but do not weight down others about you. It is forbidden to throw the weight of you fate and pain on others' shoulders. Do not whine. Sing, and make merry.

...Yes, Georgians have the gift for joy. The gift for illicit joy, for there seems to be no cause for joy, or, rather, there is everything for this joy not to be.

...We, Georgians are the air and not the earth. And this has its consequences.”



Merab Abramishvili

And diverse cultures, different from one another, came to participate in this merry tragedy in Tbilisi of that time. On one hand, Russian artists arriving in masses, escaping the civil wars and the extreme poverty. This is how Titsian Tabidze remembers it:

“It was a phantasmagoria, truly an astral dust, a hoarfrost was freezing Russia then, there was a civil war, an oceanic cold of North Pole and a mystical state-inducing starvation...

Civilized men were kissing the earth before us in Tbilisi and weeping when they saw the lights of electricity, as if people risen from graves could not stand the air and the light.

Vasili Kamensky, the most bohemian and courageous of poets, akin to Stenka Razin in temperament, would weep in a cafe when feeling the tingle of warmth and told, with Russian integrity, endless stories of the cold in Moscow. We used to hear a phrase then that one young poet brought with him from Prague: an academician Ivan Bunin is yawning and says: God, I wish I was in Georgia now.

This gave rise to the legend of Georgia as an oasis, this revived the biblical legend that the paradise was to be found on this side of Euphrates.”

In their own time, Pushkin and others had forged for the Russian Empire an image of Georgia and Caucasus as an exotic, perilous country, which was equally a land of dreams, while in the period under discussion this “exotic place” proved ready to shelter the ideas of avant-garde, futurism and Dada, to discuss Freud, Marx and Bergson – in Georgian, Russian, Armenian, Azerbaijani and so on.



Collection dedicated to Sofia Melnikova, 'Kara Dervish', Tbilisi Armenian Futurism, 1918

It must be noted that the Blue Horns themselves, all members included, were new to Tbilisi. One of them called this the “great relocation” but this relocation too was a part of a larger historical shift: Georgians, almost all through the history, were averse to the cities and urban spaces, preferring rural life, whereas during the period of our discussion Georgians started massively moving to Tbilisi which, at the time, was the least Georgian of the cities – for three centuries, the city’s livelihood had depended on Armenians; it was also populated by Persians, Hebrews, Russians, Yezidi, Azerbaijanis and people of other nations. Shaitanbazar was a spot for poetry competitions between the wandering Ashiks, who sang their mukhambazi, majama and mustazad in Georgian language and to Persian motifs. Hamkar and Karachogeli cultures coexisted with that of Kinto; in certain parts of the city you could hear the balconies emitting the sounds of the first pianos brought from Europe, while in other parts of the city a Shiite celebration called Shahsei Vahsei was taking place, which, by the way, was first witnessed by Osip Mandelstam in Tbilisi, later finding its way in his poetry.



Shaitan Bazaar, painter Richard Sommer, 1917

Ignited by the European poetry, the Blue Horns found Tbilisi a little too Asian for their tastes. And despite the reports of Titsian and the last Ashik of Tiflis, Ietim Gurji, drinking, rejoicing and spending nights on the streets of the city, the conflict between the Parisian project of the Blue Horns and the Eastern spirit of Tbilisi was growing. This was precisely the time when a deep self-reflection started occurring in Tbilisi and the identity of Tbilisi as well as Georgia came to the forefront more than ever before. In the papers of the time one often finds essays, articles and manifestos that reflect on Tbilisi and attempt a reconciliation of its conflicting Eastern and Western origins.

On one hand, a unique synthesis was ripening: this phrase by Titsian may serve to encapsulate the whole dream project of Fantastic Tbilisi, palpable even to this day:

*I planted Hafiz's rose in Proudhon's vase,
 In Besik's garden I shall plant Baudelaire's evil flowers.*

Elsewhere he sets as their project a synthesis of Rustaveli and Mallarme: “*The great Georgian artist of the future must be the meeting point between Rustaveli and Mallarme. I understand Rustaveli as a unity where Georgian language comes together, Mallarme being the same for European presentism and futurism,*” - at the same time, Titsian is unable to hold back an occasional deep-seated hatred

towards Asia, which only grew with the “victory” of “the City of Poets”. He publishes a “Manifesto for Asia” where he raids against Asia with the radicalism typical of the time:

Wharfs taller than Caucasus shall be mounted in Georgia and the express trains will cross the desert; Georgian poem too will boil with new steel – we await new barricades. Mallarme and Kant will tear down the Mongolian turban. New visionary power will widen the narrow cut of their eyes. Robespierre will pass over Asia like Shalmaneser and the new scaffold will shine against the setting sun.

Georgia will return to Asia as a conqueror: this is the new path of the conquistadors and the princes of machinery, Gog and Magog will shatter the dead land. The firstborn voice – the voice of the poets in revolt – renunciation of Asia.”

How curious to observe Titsian’s metamorphosis: from a symbolist and a dandy, by way of a theoretician of cultural synthesis, to something akin to a preacher of European colonialism (after Sovietization, some more metamorphoses were in store for him...).

This process was further agitated by separation from the Empire, with the country yet again confronted by the quest for the new center. The uncertain future was feeding the geopolitical unconscious with fantastic dreams of Parisian orientation. This quest for the center has been an existential given all through the history of Georgia. And poets took this quest upon themselves.

06.

In his work, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, the historian Ronald Grigor Suny writes that Georgia, being a small country caught in complex geopolitical circumstances, has almost always had to find balance between the surrounding centers, as its decisions in orientation were crucial to its future state, politics and obligations. Such centers were never desirable or reliable, but rather one was preferable to another at a given moment. This center then would leave a strong mark on the culture and spirituality.

In his 2011 essay, the philosopher Giorgi Maisuradze offers us a deeper perspective on our nation’s extroverted, centripetal drive:

“Soviet Union, Russia, Iran or Byzantium were not mere conduits for certain individuals of Georgian origin to express themselves and enter a larger scene, but the entire Georgian culture would always take its sustenance and adopt its impulses from the large empires. One might say that the originality of Georgian culture lies in its unoriginality. It is a certain capacity for mimicry, which, instead of creating original or self-sustained forms, takes them from another, usually invading country’s culture and makes them Georgian. Such a synthesis results in a mosaic made up of the elements borrowed from diverse cultures, presenting in its entirety a miniature albeit specific and distinguished image.”

A mosaic he is referring to is probably borrowed from an essay by Mandelstam. Mandelstam, who had had a direct experience of the “Fantastic City” wrote an essay entitled “A Few Things Regarding Georgian Art” two years after its fall. For us, this text, like so many things from that period, works on two temporal layers: as a product of observation it directly reflects the culture of the time, but it also has a lot to tell us today:

“The essence of Georgian art has always been Georgia’s relation to the East but there never was a complete merging, Georgia always remained separate. I would place Georgian culture to the ornamental type. Such cultures, enclosing the vast and completed area of the foreign, principally assimilate its ornament while fiercely resisting the inherently hostile essence of the powerful neighbouring regions. Now across Georgia resounds a howling sound: “Away from the East – Towards the West! We are not Asians – we are Europeans, Parisians!” How infinite is naivete of Georgian artistic intelligentsia! ... This tendency – away from the East! - has always existed in Georgian art, but was resolved not in a blatant slogan but rather by refined artistic and formal means.”



Osip Mandelstam

Europe too, as a symbol of an unknown homeland, has always existed in our culture – a shelter for the Christian Georgia, surrounded by alien, hostile empires and religions, but up to this moment the bridging had never been possible. Whereas now Georgia was full of artists and state functionaries with European education under their belts, they spoke European languages and led correspondences with the thinkers and like-minded people of the time. The seminal works that would transform European culture in the decades to come were already accessible and attended to in Tbilisi. Reportedly, Karl Marx met Niko Nikoladze personally and offered him a position as a representative of the 1st International in the Caucasus; Georgian intellectuals were actively engaged in the European philosophical discourse; upon their return from European universities, they brought with them the contemporary intellectual trends; the father of Georgian psychology, Dimitiri Uznadze, published a work on the ideas of Henri Bergson, and so on.

This is why some think that the key to the current “stuck” state of Tbilisi may be buried in the processes that were very soon suppressed with violence.

07.

What really fell when, in 1920, the Red Bolshevik army approached Tbilisi, was not only the First Republic but also the “City of Poets” – as a creative process that was of vital necessity for natural selection and experimentation.

Possibly this went generally unnoticed in the chaos and confusion of the moment, but the results of that inability to reevaluate the fantasy pulsates in different shapes in our cultural and political life to this day. It seems that the City of Poets, this quasi-sovereign, short-lived poetic state turned out to be the most important model for Tbilisi. Why? The kind of Tbilisi that was in fact created by the Soviet Union was the harmless and bureaucratic version of the “Fantastic City”: even contemporary Georgia sells that image of Tbilisi which is, in essence, the Fantastic City, the City of Poets, but again, presented in form of a touristic simulacrum. Over the last 21 years, I have heard from most everyone what a better Tbilisi would be like and they are all variations on Paolo’s Fantastic City. Could it be that it was precisely the poets that managed, a century ago, to penetrate the subconscious of the city? Maybe it is the poets who can envision the better city, and not the marketing specialists and PR managers that Tbilisi trusts so naively and blindly?

08.

Even the poets could not have thought up the historical finale for the City of Poets of such symbolic and tragic scope as it actually had. Recollections and documents tell how – as the news of the approaching Red Army spread and the Georgian government decided to leave the city without meeting resistance – Paolo decided it was his duty to intervene. This is not unexpected, but instead reinforces our proposition that this was Paolo’s city, this was the City of Poets, and Paolo, as a poet, could not stand aside.

There are several versions of how Paolo greeted the Red Army. According to one version, he and Titsian made a flag out of white sheet, and according to another, Paolo mounted a white horse and headed toward the horizon to salute the invading army at the city’s threshold, to ensure their peaceful entry and avoid any damage to the human life. A self-proclaimed committee existed in the city, with Paolo himself as a member and a possible founder, that was to peacefully hand over the city.

"Paolo was the first to break free of the walls of the decadent school and join the platform of the Soviet literature. It should also be said that being a Symbolist did not stand in the way of his mounting a white horse the very first day of the establishment of the Soviet State and thus greeting the flag of the Soviet revolution hanging over Tbilisi, because in his imagination he connected the outer signs of the revolution, rejection and destruction of the former, with the similar pathos expressed in the manifestos of the Symbolist poets." writes Sergi Chilaia in “Two Decades” (1986).

Indeed! even a poet could not come up with such a “perfect” finale: mounted on a white horse, the Prince of the City of Poets is greeting the bloodthirsty Red Army at the outskirts of the city, so they can take over the city from his very hands.



Red Army in Tbilisi February 25, 1921

In a few months, Paolo had already written and published a poem “To the New Georgia”:

“The gun is ready! The sword is too!
with our bare teeth we’ll have our enemies.
Let us then crown our future
by befriending the Red Russia.”

This is how the city of poets fell. This exactly is what I meant when I said that even a poet could not come up with such a “perfect” finale: mounted on a white horse, the Prince of the City of Poets is greeting the bloodthirsty Red Army at the outskirts of the city, so they can take over the city from his very hands. This is how the city of poets fell and what followed was a long, unpleasant and tragic process, bringing first the suppression of literary movements, including the Blue Horns – later the papers would constantly publish different writers denouncing the Blue Horns as apolitical, absurd and retrograde, while Paolo wrote poems that glorified Lenin and was afoot with the march of the Party. The face of Tbilisi also changed in the poems – in “Lenin” Paolo writes: *“Tbilisi stands like a graveyard.”* Discussions about the East and West stopped, and the only allowed culture was the Soviet culture, with its newly formulated program: “National in form, Socialist in content,” by which it

pursued the Imperial practice that praises our hospitality and prancing, rather than our intellect. We are allowed to revolt, but without political or existential programs, and without causing any disturbance. The constant feast of Queenoba, masquerading and surface-floating, the endless social round dance

09.

It might be hard to find another historical context for a city where manifestos, criticism, recollections or poems written by artists a century ago, under entirely different political and economic conditions, would be so poignant a century later, for the same city. This might mean that the country was unable to work through its traumas, and having failed to meet the challenge at a time, is faced with the same challenge under different guises repeatedly, and shall keep meeting it until it is overcome, or else the shadow of the Fantastic City is renounced entirely.

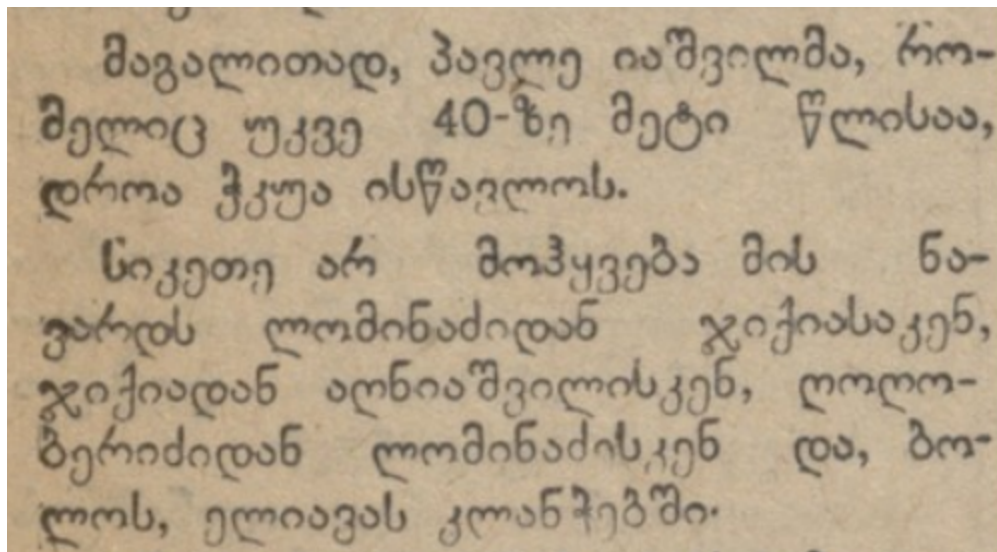
No matter how brilliant this call for the City of Poets, there is something else that Paolo, as an archetype, has to teach us: he is the tragic symbol and an image of a rebel whose rebellion had neither cause nor end, who had no political program and the whole push turned into a mere show, contributing to the establishment of a new center, existing merely on a level of a slogan. As Robakidze warned us, staying on the swing while the world is crumbling, sooner or later, one finds a scaffold underneath the swing.

This is how remorselessly Mandelstam, once a friend and even a translator of Paolo, describes that moment:

“At the moment Georgian poetry is represented by the group called the Blue Horns, having a residence in Tiflis, headed by Paolo Iashvili and Titsian Tabidze. Within the country, they are considered the judge supreme in the sphere of arts, with God alone as their judge. Cultivated by a slavish adoration towards the French modernism, which they received at a second remove through the Russian translations, they please themselves and their readers with cheap rhetoric insistence on the baudelairean gimmick, boldness of Arthur Rimbaud and a simplified demonism. All of which is seasoned with the superficial exoticism of the mundane. [...] For us they are in the ranks with Penza or Tambov...”

The year 1937 – the year of Great Terror – proved fateful for Paolo. Lavrenti Beria mentioned him in a public speech and this speech was printed in the magazine “Literary Georgia.” (here, again, we are confronted with the role of a poet in our culture: Beria, Kandid Charkviani and others often mention this or that poet or writer in their speeches, even occasionally denouncing or praising a phrase from their work). Beria said only this:

“Among the Georgian writers and artists are certain individuals who need to reexamine their rapport with the enemies of Georgian people, seriously contemplate this and draw all the necessary conclusions, for we shall not allow anyone to pretend, deceiving Georgian people and, hidden under the mask of a Soviet writer or artist, doing evil works with the enemies of people. For instance, Paolo Iashvili, already past forty, would do well to come to his senses.”



Newspaper 'Literary Georgia', 1937, Beria about Paolo Iashvili

These words set in action a series of events that had Paolo on trial at the hands of his own colleagues for four days, at the end of which he killed himself in the Writers House. There are people whose fate is so intertwined with the processes that affect others that their fate belongs to more than themselves. This is why I consider Paolo an archetypal poet in our culture. In the same 1937 almost everyone was executed. The violence engraved poetry. The reality engraved the fantasy. Utopia killed utopia. But these words “simplified,” “superficial,” “seasoned with exoticism” – seem both a curse and a precise diagnosis of the main problems of our culture. Ebullient in form, systemic in content. Such Tbilisian rebellion never leaves the aesthetic frame and is ever doomed to be used for counter-revolutionary aims.

In this essay we employ the poet and poetry as a cultural and creative counter-polarity to the excessive utilitarianism, materialism, corruption and money-mongering.

In the last years, Tbilisi is filled with mottoes. They were clearly not created by the poets, and sometimes you'll think their creators have hardly even seen the other side of Tbilisi. But Tbilisi really is the city of defeated poets and the echo of this defeat bemoans itself in its cities. And where the poets are defeated come the powers that...