

## Contemporary Georgian Poetry of the So-Called 1990s and Its Origins

(Compilation or conspectus)

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The article briefly examines modernist and avant-garde tendencies in Georgian poetry from the early 20th century to the present day, discussing the connections, similarities, and differences in this tradition, rooted in the symbolism of the Tsisperkantslebi (Blue Horns) group, the simplified ashugh song poetics of the Tbilisi Guilds, and the radical futurist experiments of Ilya Zdanevich and Nikoloz Chachava, and, as a distant echo, analyzes Georgian free verse of the 1970s and neo-avant-garde or postmodern poetry of the 1980s–1990s.

### The beginning

Modernist trends in twentieth-century Georgian poetry begin with the “Blue Horns” and the movement of symbolism. Soon after, the era of the avant-garde will come - futurism, constructivism, dadaism and leftist poetry will appear on the scene. Tbilisi at that time was one of the cultural centers. Among the poets associated with Georgia, the most significant figure at that time was Vladimir Mayakovsky. Alongside him were excellent innovative poets, such as Ilya Zdanevich, Nikoloz Chachava and others, whose experiments were still understood by a narrower circle. All of them represented leftist poetry, who continued the path set by the symbolists in their own work of rearranging classical values and concepts. By the 1930s, the influence of realism becomes dominant. In our country, this was called socialist realism, and in America - social realism. Ultimately, these three stages of poetic formation - Symbolism, Futurism/Dadaism, and Folk Realism - emerged as the main platforms of the first half of the 20th century.

After social realism, the period of lyrical realism begins in Georgian poetry. This was the case both in literature and in painting. Idyllic realism, which emerged in the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, was a kind of continuation of social realism, adopting the features of monumentality from it and, ultimately, reducing it to simple forms.

Since the 1970s, lyrical realism has been followed by confessionalism, a new tradition of free verse, with moods oriented on one's own, personal feelings, which was also related to the symbolist views of the beginning of the century. On the other hand, vers libre was also nourished by lyrical realism, but it mostly was sharing the experience of the symbolists and simplified its meaning. A worldview built on personal experiences would later become part of postmodernist poetic aesthetics, which still represents one of the main lines in modern Georgian poetry today.

Another decade or so will pass and the period of neo-avant-garde literature will begin, which also coincides with the initial stage of the postmodern era. In terms of form, the poem is completely liberated, and the content side of poetics becomes as realistic as possible. The text seems to have turned into an ordinary diary. The place of the statement is sometimes taken by documentaryism related to the author's personality. This is also the era of the end of literature. Self-reflexivity is one of the main characteristics of this era - in its aesthetics it uses not allusion or even plagiarism, but serial, algorithmic generation, sometimes with completely meaningless formalism, and sometimes with clever, but still futile attempts at content, because its narrative never has the tone of genuine, internal determination that characterized any previous era.

When we talk about the latest Georgian poetry, a picture of the reality of the 1960s-1980s and, later, the 1990s is automatically drawn. These periods are somehow interconnected, first of all, perhaps, by the desire to expand the form. However, one of the main features is that the formal experiments carried out during this period were not self-serving, aimed only at external effect or shock - but rather at finding something new to say, at a new and authentic refinement of the beautiful.

The urban palette, the diversity of the phrase from the layers of life reality, the delight in formalistic frivolity were not a struggle with tradition, but one of the important and correct directions for the survival of this tradition. Because any avant-garde is not only an innovation, but also a defense of tradition - a defense against profane “novelty” tendencies.

The names of poet literati Lia Sturua and Besik Kharanuli will give us the necessary key to entering the world of modern Georgian free verse. Next to them, we should name Mamuka Tsiklauri, Jarji Pkhoveli, Borena Jachviani, Dalila Bedianidze, Bagather

Arabuli, Tamaz Badzaghua, without whom today's modern Georgian poetry would not exist.

However, the poetry of the 1970s was unfamiliar with the linguistic experiments that were later introduced by Nino Darbaiseli and then Dato Barbakadze, and which lie precisely at the interesting intersection of free verse and structuralism.

It is still relevant to note today that all of the above-mentioned traditions and trends do not belong to the sphere of so-called alternative literature, since this is a newly introduced term and denotes literature that remains outside the so-called official one, where both average innovation and pulp literature can be concentrated. But there are categories in art, namely in literature, which were previously called underground or avant-garde. Such literature, in the old formulation, is so linguistically closed, so great is the quality of the so-called "art for art's sake" in it that it would simply be utopian to expect its soon officialization. It is precisely for avant-garde literature, which does not have frivolous intentions at all, that the appearance of the term alternative literature may create great obstacles in the already narrow possibilities of representation, since it takes its place and does not even represent it in reality. On the other hand, it creates the danger of a similar simulation of official, so-called legitimized values. Therefore, its political vector can be characterized as liberal; not in the relativistic postmodernist sense (which can never acquire the political semantics of denial and leveling), but precisely in terms of a clear ideological platform.

## **Master and Apprentice**

Both official art and the avant-garde have a necessary hierarchy. An attempt to remove such hierarchy is permissible precisely in the reality of alternative literature, where experienced and inexperienced writers are treated in the same rank, in the same context. With this characteristic, alternative literature becomes a carrier of liberalism, a political agent alien to art. Such conditions in themselves generate nihilism, the destruction of the vital, extremely necessary institution of master and apprentice, the devaluation of the written and unwritten values of writers, and finally, again in the work of young authors, they massively produce pulp, mediocre literature or politically aggressive (not to mention only engagement) superficial studies.

Moreover, in the current context, the politics of alternative literature hinders the exploration of the aesthetics of postmodern relativism and instead offers us a so-called pluralist-democratic spectrum, where the main substantive issues are once again reduced to the simulation of feminism and anarchism. Thus, stereotypical ideals of openness and democracy are affirmed, which represent not so much plebeian propaganda for human or creative freedom, but freedom as an end in itself.

## **Traditional/Writing**

The first function of traditional writing is the academy, the creation of a system of coordinates, so that it becomes possible to orient oneself to them and creatively overcome them, yes, often precisely through confrontation. But such confrontations, if they are creatively honest, never aim to destroy the academy (i.e., the system of coordinates). Many modernist and postmodernist innovations were part of the academy and existed under its auspices.

The absolutism of the academy is historical discourse, which also has the practical purpose of creating conditions for the young writer to study the past and form orientations. The second absolutism concerns moral values, the determination of civic (and not only national) relevance and self-consciousness. Writing has always been connected with a generalized vision of civil, social, or cultural problems and with the processes of value formation. The destruction of this factor is the same as the destruction of writing itself, because the aesthetic cannot exist without the ethical. A work needs communication with the reader, and like everyday communication, ethics is an integral part here too.

When talking about the academy, let us clarify that official does not mean government. It simply means the academy. The government and the political can also exist on the other side of the academy. And one more clarification: the official can often be more supportive of radical innovation than the liberal.

Traditionality is a function of writing itself. It is not necessarily related to a schematic, chronological description of historicity. The history of writing is the history of overcoming traditions, excesses (and not shortcomings). If this mechanism is slowed down in the academy, its criticism can usually be carried out by the university (which is unlikely due to the cult of scholasticism there) and, even more so, by the avant-garde underground, since all three components - the academy, the university laboratory and the avant-garde - are within the boundaries of one discourse. Their value theses are based on hierarchy, in contrast to the values of indifference and loyalty of the alternative press - or the Internet alternative press (which it always establishes and protects with disloyal force).

## **Linguistic/Literary Practices**

Structuralism in poetry, whose precedent in Georgia preceded the era of postmodernism, appears to us as the unconditional basis of language poetry. Although we are not dealing with such a multitude of names here as in the case of vers libre, we must also take into account that this direction, compared to vers libre, has a not so long history in our country. The first serious application belongs to the poet and literary critic Nino Darbaiseli; this publication consisted of the poem itself, its interline pattern and the author's own extensive literary commentary on it, and was presented as a single poetic body. It is noteworthy that this first voluminous structuralist presentation took place precisely within the framework of the academic newspaper *Literaturuli Sakartvelo* (Literary Georgia) in the Soviet period, in the mid-1980s.

This tradition is continued by the poet and philosopher Dato Barbakadze, methodically and in a number of unique ways. The third poet, related to this tradition and also with a poetics based on the vers libre, is Ushangi Gabitashvili. He managed to publish only one book, and that too quite late. Ushangi Gabitashvili's poetry explores abstractionism more; in the form of his poetry, Georgian literature acquired an abstractionist vers libre. Previously, an abstract poem was presented in our country as a

musical poem, a work built on the primacy of sound, which was common with Galaktion Tabidze.

Post-structuralist tendencies also became noticeable from the second half of the 1980s. We can collectively call such manifestations extra-literary practices, the representation of which was more often in exhibition halls, in the form of installation or performance.

On the other hand, signs of, conditionally, oral poetry, or the simulation of oral subcultural poetry, appeared. An interesting direction here was developed by the Reactive Club - Irakli Charkviani and Kote Kubaneishvili in their public representations. We organized their first such performance in 1993 at the public library. At that time, Irakli Charkviani and Kote Kubaneishvili independently developed the modern style of oral poetry, ashugh—the former in musical form, and the latter in the form of humorous and caustic couplets. The authenticity of the Ashug direction of Irakli Charkviani's poetry is confirmed both by the previously existing tradition of poetry of the Tbilisi urban subculture (Sayat-Nova, Ietim Gurji, Givishvili, Skandarnova, Hazira), and today, by the best examples of the work of modern poets Erekle Deisadze and Zura Jishkariani at the intersection of poetic and musical activity.

Also included is the unique publication of poems by artists representing the visual arts - Karlo Kacharava, Mamuka Tsetskhladze, Maia Tsetskhladze and Koka Ramishvili in the Samizdat magazine *Yakhsari* in 1989. These were undoubtedly interesting samples, qualitatively unusual and unexpectedly sophisticated for a first publication (e.g., Koka Ramishvili's conceptualism, Karlo Kacharava's pessimistic socialist romance, which well demonstrated the fascination with the ideas of Arte Povera and the style of Egnate Ninoshvili, Maia Tsetskhladze's rough expressionism - the influence of purely artistic tendencies was obvious). In the same progressive category of modern poetry can be placed fragments of Ushangi Khumarashvili's diaries, a kind of documentary haiku, which the artist wrote during the same period, but only became known to us later.

From the point of view of semiotic liberalization, the most radical should be called the poetic work of Karlo Kacharava, when he did not even call his own work poetry. Thus, it would obviously be alien to him to free himself from lyrical-romantic subjectivisms, which is usually a necessary attribute of the stylistic determination of a poet. His texts were scattered among his own fabled paintings, critical remarks and essays, exhibition pavilions, unpublished poems and diaries. Karlo Kacharava's poems resemble a summary of his fabled pictures, or a synopsis of film images. Of course, we cannot say that these poems belong to *vers libre*, or to poems in prose, of the type of Max Jacob. Here, there is a greater share of the narrative plot, conveyed in the form of a non-canonical haiku. A completely non-poetic narrative, where both metaphor and language consist of storytelling standards, except for rhythm, which is a crucial detail for considering his texts as poetry.

The first magazine of the literary samizdat was *Yakhsari*, which was published in 1989 and was created by poets Gela Kikolashvili, Omar Turmanauli, Lia Bedoshvili, Dato Barbakadze, Andro Buachidze and others. This magazine was published under the co-editorship of poet Badri Gugushvili and the author of this article.

Further history was actually created by the Dato Barbakadze Journal, which at first existed only in oral, auditorium form, and later took the form of a video journal (archive) too. Dato Barbakadze Journal managed to be a promoter and representative of many new trends and young writers over the years. The journal's meetings were held in the first building of the university and attracted a wide audience. Its interests included the latest semiotic theories, versions of intertext, dialogism, and hypertext discourses. Dato Barbakadze later published other literary periodicals. It is worth noting, first of all, the journal *Polylog* and the newspaper *+ Literature* (together with journalist Maia Gogoladze).

Dato Barbakadze has been exploring his own style for years using typical deconstructivist methods. If Karlo Kacharava never publicly declared himself a poet and, as we have already said, perhaps he himself did not know it, Dato Barbakadze begins and continues the semiotic research of his poetry with complete programmatic motivation, searching for the contents and forms of the intersection of lyricism and logic, romanticism and algorithm. His lyricism comes from the depths of grammar, it is generative, just like his several similar formal experiments between combinatorics and generativity.

It is precisely in these signs that the world of Dato Barbakadze's poetry is entirely linguistic, even in the most lyrical dedications. In such dedications, the vision is as unusually introverted as it is naturally directed outward, towards the addressee. Sometimes the share of introversion increases significantly and turns not towards the seen, but towards the seer, towards the vision itself, towards the language that expresses it. Barbakadze's romanticism paradoxically combines within itself a lyrical character, grammatical deconstructivism and linguistic abstraction. In his latest experiments, Dato Barbakadze has attempted to completely replace political and philosophical speech in the place of poetry, just as he had previously experimented with syntactic combinatorics, when phrase versions completely occupied the body of versification and verse.

A contributing event to Samizdat can be considered the emergence of an organized press supporting it in the first half of the 1990s, in the form of the newspapers *Rubikoni* (editor: poet Ioseb Macharashvili) and *Mesame Gza* (editor: poet Ramin Sajaia), where we find a number of successful attempts at broad literary discourse and research. These newspapers were published by the Republican Center of Writers, which Ioseb Macharashvili and I headed in 1992-1995. Many young, interesting authors and translators emerged precisely under the conditions of the activities of this center. Thematic meetings were organized, thematic publications were published, and the first anniversary newspaper issue of Ilia Zdanevich was also published here.

## **The Politics of Poetics - Books/Tonality/Mood**

The practice of publishing books during this period is associated with the Anomalous Poetry group (poets Shota Iatashvili, Giorgi Bundovani, Zurab Rtveliashvili). They published several books - *Wings of Death*, *Resident*, *Chronophages* and *Collection of Anomalous Poetry*. Since this group had a programmatic character, they also published a manifesto. The first response to their program and poetry belongs to the excellent poet David Mchedluri, at that time, the chairman of the Writers' Union. In an article published in the newspaper *7 Dghe* (7 Days) in 1993, he discusses the program of the Anomalous Group as a common platform

for their poetics, but later his criticism becomes fragmented and isolated, where he evaluates each individual author individually. David Mchedluri, although he seems to welcome the vulgar themes and intonations of the given authors as adequate forms of realism for that given time, at the same time considers Shota Iatashvili to be the most moderate of these authors (and, logically, inappropriate for their program) and presents his moderation as an unconditional criterion of literaryness (as one of the priorities of academicism). Indeed, according to postmodernist aesthetics, the most literary and, accordingly, the least accessible in this linguistic group is Shota Iatashvili. Badri Gugushvili, Tamaz Badzaghua, Ela Gochiashvili and Nino Darbaiseli can be placed in the same category. Obviously, all these poets are excellent vers librist, their style, their way of being is more than literary enough. And it is precisely this more than enough literaryity that inclines their work towards the standard of linguistic poetry. However, Badri Gugushvili and Ella Gochiashvili still remained more on the side of tradition, with them "homeland" often really coincides with the generally accepted semantics. Badri Gugushvili, as just like before him, and on a larger scale Dalila Bedianidze, had successful attempts to completely introduce publicism into the body of verse, poem. Ella Gochiashvili is a very interesting lyricist with her own original imagist personality, classicist reverence, and delicate idealism. Her language is a wonderful pastiche of the once existing Russian tradition.

This "literaryness" is not pure and simple, as it seems from one or two points of view. It is difficult to grasp their true aesthetic credo because here it is literaryness itself, the versification of the vers libre, that is the theme of their postmodernist appeal. The theory of simulacra (and not only simulation) is most strongly revealed with Shota Iatashvili and Nino Darbaiseli, in contrast to Barbakadze's index-substituting poetics between literature and other humanities. This moment was most radically revealed in the aforementioned famous self-commentary poem by Nino Darbaiseli or in his other poetics composed using structuralist methods.

Zurab Rtveliashvili's poetry is also highly abstract. As we have already noted, the mythology of rebellion, this abstraction of rebellion, is the axis of Rtveliashvili's poetry. All such experiments can be considered as social and political criticism, and not as personal or subjectivist complaints. In this regard, Zurab Rtveliashvili is the only poet in the aforementioned group who remains a linguistic poet even when he explores a space not belonging to poetry: that of blackmail and politics. Moreover, it is all the more difficult, it seems like a double task, when linguistic poetry manages to simultaneously contain both lyricism and radical criticism.

Giorgi Bundovani's early poetry was also a wonderful pastiche of Baudelaire, the decadence of horrors, the pathetic subjectivist negation, but his recent poems, along with a certain emphasized monotony, also indicate an unusual poetic progression. Here there is an identification of the poetic meaning with the social meaning and an elegiacness marked by the tragedy of narcissism, an unfounded primitivism, a mixing of street, statistical and newspaper speech, where all this is a wonderful artistic transformation and dedication to the dear Edgar Allan Poe's gloomy tradition.

## **მოდერნიზმი/პასტორალური პოეზია**

As we mentioned at the beginning, modernism in Georgian poetry originates from the symbolism of the Blue Horns. However, its scope extends not only to the distant past for us, but also to the reality of the later period, including Ioseb Noneshvili, Irakli Abashidze, Grigol Abashidze, Mukhran Machavariani, Murman Lebanidze, Shota Nishnianidze, Vakhtang Javakhadze and Khuta Berulava, that is, those poets who represent the classics of Georgian poetry of the Soviet period. Most modernists are characterized by a high sensitivity to conventional forms and their equally conventional modifications, an urban sensitivity and its refined attributes. On the other hand, poets of the modernist style are characterized by strong pastoral descriptions and visions, and this is probably the result of their heightened attention to form and color.

New, original artists of the modern city are David Mchedluri, Lasha Nadareishvili, Omar Turmanauli, Andro Buachidze, their poetry shows living images of the city or its history, the shadows and tones of houses and parks (especially with Gigi Sulakauri, Gela Kikolashvili and Badri Gugushvili). The city as a sad antithesis of nature is brought to the fore with Elguja Marghia, Makvala Gonashvili, Dalila Bedianidze. The new symbolic forms of urban imagery are magnificent with Givi Alkhazishvili, Ela Gochiashvili, Lali Totadze. Zaza Tvaradze has darker colors, where the latest historical period is reflected, but not anomalously and nihilistically, on the contrary, imprinted with acute sadness. Yes, all of the above-mentioned poets are characterized by pastoral themes, which again emphasizes the non-mannerism of their urban themes. As one of the inseparable urban motifs, social criticism is not uncommon among them.

The tradition of modern Georgian poetry, of course, continues today, and the near future shows its new problematics and necessary achievements. Until then, it can be firmly said that Georgian modernism and avant-gardeism are already a well-established academic line in Georgian poetry, which balances and neutralizes the attempts of any vulgar and provincial-nationalist currents to enter, so that the real, even if it is presented in an unrefined and rough manner, does not lose its place.



“... On July 2, at another Dada Seminar organized by David Chikhladze, a somewhat scandalous representation of the Reactive Club took place: it was one of the most joyful celebrations last summer...”, Karlo Kacharava, newspaper “Droni”, January 22, 1993



Photo 2. June 25, 1992, Public Library, Dada-Seminar. In the photo from left: Nata Amirejibi, Dato Barbakadze, Shalva Pantsulaia, Megi Burchuladze, David Chikhladze, Sandro Kobauri, Zhenia Kikodze, Gia Chiladze, Archil Darchia, Irakli Charkviani, Karlo Kacharava, Kote Kubaneishvili, Manana Javashvili. Sitting: Niko Lomashvili, Niko Tsetskhladze, Goga Dadunashvili. Photo: Guram Tsibakhashvili



Badri Gugushvili and David Chikhladze at the Gastronomic Poetry Tour, 1993



David Chikhladze and Dato Barbakadze, 1995



Zurab Rtveliashvili and Giorgi Bundovani, 1996



Shota Iatashvili - at the Dada-King-President elections