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Rebecca Gould

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Niko Samedashvili’s Fleeting Moments

TRANSLATED BY REBECCA GOULD

Niko Samedashvili (1905-1964) was thirty-three when the greatest Georgian poets of his generation – Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, and Mikhail Javakhishvili – were killed in the 1930s purges that permanently altered literary life in the former Soviet Union. Not wishing to be executed for his political views, Samedashvili lived and died in utter obscurity, remaining unpublished during his lifetime.

The milieu in which Samedashvili wrote his poems recalls that faced by Kafka on the brink of the Second World War. Also like Kafka, Samedashvili spent his entire life as a bureaucratic functionary. He never joined the Georgian Writer’s Union or participated in the literary gatherings that were mandatory for all official writers during that period. His poetic output attests to a conviction that the path of obscurity was the only path open to a Soviet Georgian poet wishing to retain his integrity.

Since the publication of his poems in 1974 and 1989, with the onset of a now fully open climate for literary publication, Samedashvili is posthumously coming to be recognized as one of the great unknown poets of Georgian literary modernity. The rise in his importance to Georgian literary history is also attested by the many pilgrimages Georgians make to his grave today in contemporary Tbilisi. Samedashvili will soon take his place alongside the two Tabidzes (Titsian and Galaktion), Paolo Iashvili, and Gabriel Jabushanuri. Collectively, these poets rewrote the Georgian literary canon and brought Georgia’s ancient literary tradition into conversation with modern life. When his legacy is measured against the achievements of his fellow Georgian modernists, Samedashvili will be recognized as the most philosophical, and the most given to reflecting on the absurdity of life under the conditions of Soviet rule.

Samedashvili is not given to verbal pyrotechnics; time and again, he searches for the expressions that transparently convey images of suffering, confusion, despair, resignation, and, less often, contentment and joy. But what is simple in one language all too often appears as empty formalism in another. The translator of these poems faces many challenges; perhaps the hardest to surmount is Samedashvili’s embrace of monochromatic, deliberately deadpan language. Lucid Georgian phrases risk losing their imagistic power in translation. Thus, to take one example, the title translated here as “A Heart That Used to Ache” is expressed economically in Georgian as natkevni guli, natkevni, being the past participle of the verb “to cause pain”. The phonic power of natkveni by itself evokes pain, entirely apart from the word’s semantic content.

The poem “Yellow Lungs” affords another example of resistance to translation. The phrase rendered here as “on this side transience” is a diluted version of the idea that is expressed in Georgian with one powerful word: tsutisopeli. Tsutisopeli combines two words in a genitive construction: tsuti (instant, a fleeting period of time) and sopeli (village). This single word thus translates literally as “the village of an instant”, seemingly a nonsensical combination. But in Georgian it makes perfect, and indeed devastating, sense. To reference “an instant’s village” is to demonstrate the brevity of human life, to signal mortality by alluding to the most potent symbol of collective identity: a village. In the Georgian literary and folk tradition, the world is conceived as a combination of fleeting time (tsuti) and a community (sopeli). The poet who has tsutisopeli in his poetic armory is able to suggest in five damning syllables that the human community cannot withstand the ravages of time.

Once Samedashvili’s deployment of tsutisopeli is grasped in terms of its literary precedents, the poet’s thematic itinerary appears more clearly etched. “Yellow Lungs” foretells
the poet’s own death from tuberculosis. What history has forgotten or otherwise suppressed is here permanently inscribed into the literary record. In view of the contrasts between the passing spectacle of human existence and hard-won permanence of literary life that mark the poet’s oeuvre, the inscription on Samedashvili’s much-visited grave is a fitting place to conclude:

გაივლის დრო და დიდი ხნის მერე
იტყვიან: – ნიკო გვეწვია.
შემოიხვევა ცის უწვდენ მერქანს
ჩემი ცხოვრება და პოეზია.

A little time will pass here and then
they will speak of how they tortured Niko.
Then the sky will wrap this tortured wood
and bless my life and poems.

Further reading:


Yellow Lungs

While Georgia and I waited for dusk, lightening swept clean the firmament. Your body’s tired breath dried my lungs like leaves.

Light clung to the moss’s fingertips. Black-clad women drenched the road. We feared life’s severance from this: on one side transience; on the other, death.

I lost my mind when the wind whistled in the twilight. My death was as lucid to you as my yellow, rancid lungs.

Fate brought us to the cliff. I dreamed of silent suicides. Beneath the moon, my endless desert glowed like an endless sky.

Suddenly, a rainbow broke the horizon. To make the bells cease, to make silence speak, I returned to the source of its sighs.

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Epitaph

The sun crossed the sky like a ferry. The naked wind wept in the forest. A lonely raven cried poems from the bridge. Christ returned from paradise.

I barely calmed my aged birds. My eyes are numb from pagan prayers. The crazy poet sat crying on the rock while mute mountains keened.

Crushed body, tired thoughts: my life resembles a dead man. They found a pickpocket’s grave and inscribed on my name there
You stared at the world a thousand ways. Christ glowed in your eyes. When you warmed the moon with your gaze the angels cursed your pagan eyes.

You were a troubadour in the Garden of Gethsemane. On Golgotha you saw the pagan god. Why do befriend the fog when you don’t know the beginning of light or the end of darkness?

Your life hid an uprising of dreams from darkness. Time secretes cacophonies of centuries. Your life will end like a ballad.

Even crucifixion couldn’t save you. Don’t avoid your fate when the pillars moan They want to see you suffering before killing you.

Now you walk, afraid of the trees. You try to keep the shadows from your home. A little time, and you’ll be grey, your skull lodged in a cliff’s mouth.

Your courage will push the idol away. The wind’s slow grace will deflect Armazi. A flock of gods will descend like sheep from Mt. Golgotha.
Faith

My thoughts accompany me like beggars when I wander through the streets alone. The loneliness of these streets guards the human race.

Incense trembles in the stars’ rays. The moon paints itself, remembering mixtures of earth and incense, salvaged from dust bins.

A Heart That Used to Ache

Walk alone and sit silently. Let your ears melt to the melody. Let the shadows hover by your side. Let yourself forget.

Your eyes are held prisoner by the shadows on these walls. Infant snakes nest in the cliff. Satiated clouds bear the light onwards.

A Memory

When you told me to drink hard I thought we might do better by laughing at the wicked rain.

The wind screamed in the gorge. Lost in the flow of time, reduced to rags by the streets, Nietzsche roared.

Let’s drink to all philosophers, and to everyone for whom pleasures are not the reward. Your mother’s shadow persists. That’s why we hide from the wicked rain.
I walk in sadness.
Everywhere I go, night flows.
If you look into my heart, you will see so many tragedies.

I was beat into prophecy.
I am framed by fate like an icon.
Only sometimes do I set off towards the wind, when the rooster crows.

The moon shimmers translucently.
Seeking to sadden me, the light thinks I am made of stone.
Beneath me blood-rivers flow.