

Sufic Traces in Georgian Literature

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Katharine Vivian has translated several Georgian classics, notably Rustaveli's *The Knight in Panther Skin*, Orbeliani's *Book of Wisdom and Lies* and a section of *The Georgian Chronicle*. She has also contributed to symposia on the literature and culture of Georgia in London, Bari and Tbilisi.

Sufic Traces in Georgian Literature

Georgia in Transcaucasia has a literature with a long history, constantly enriched by contact with the great civilizations on its frontiers. The first known works date from the fifth century, and even before the Georgian alphabet was formed the people possessed a store of learning and legend brought from Greece and Persia. These ancient myths and tales were transformed and developed into a vast body of folklore. Some of the most popular legends are those centred on the hero Amiran, a Georgian Prometheus. For his crime of stealing fire from Heaven and bringing it to men, he is chained to a rock on Mount Elbruz in the Caucasus where an eagle tears perpetually at his liver. According to the writer Grigol Robakidze, the liver is the seat of the force which controls the transition from the waking state to sleep. The Georgian words for *liver* and *vigil* – *ghvidzli* and *ghvidzili* – are almost identical. Thus in attacking Amiran's liver the eagle causes it to become enlarged and keep him constantly awake. He can never sleep: a possible explanation of his curious punishment.

The date of the earliest known inscriptions is about 150 AD, and the first literary work of note – the *Passion of St Shushanik* – dates from the fifth century. Literary activity in the beginning was confined to religious subjects – hagiography, liturgical poetry, commentaries and translations of sacred texts. Gradually it extended to history, with a chronicle of the conversion of Georgia to Christianity, followed by annals of the Georgian kings. These were collected and revised at the end of the seventeenth century under the title of the *Georgian Chronicle* or, literally, 'the life of Georgia'. In the Middle Ages the scope of literary work was greatly enlarged through the influence of the Greek renaissance, and the establishment of a number of centres of learning by an enlightened monarch, David IV.

There were two periods in the history of the Georgian kingdom when literature of outstanding quality appeared. The first was the Golden Age, the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, epoch of the Sufi poets of Persia and the troubadours of Western Europe. At the end of the twelfth century Shota Rustaveli, a poet at the court of Queen Tamar, composed his epic *The Knight in Panther Skin*, one of the treasures of world literature. There followed a long period of invasion and internal strife, until late in the seventeenth century came a new renaissance of art and letters, the so-called

Silver Age. Illustrious literary figures of this period were the scholar statesman Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani and a number of poets, among them David Guramishvili. One of Orbeliani's principal works was a Georgian lexicon; another was the splendid collection of stories, jokes and sayings translated as *A Book of Wisdom and Lies*.

Georgian writers have always drawn deeply on the national store of tradition and legend, as well as events in their long and eventful history. There is a story of the Creation which provides a backcloth to the scene of our present study, an introduction to the country and the people:

When the Creation was finished the Lord God called together representatives of all the countries of the earth, to allot to each his own territory. They assembled to wait in the ante-room – among them, naturally, being four Georgians. These were the last to arrive, fond as they were of idling in the sun. Finding that they would have long to wait, they went off to visit one of the charming little inns to be found in the Georgian countryside. When they returned the antechamber was empty. They knocked at the Lord's door. He opened, and looked at them in dismay.

'I have distributed all the land on earth,' he told them. 'There is nothing left for you.'

Far from giving way to despair, the Georgians set themselves to charm and delight the Lord. They sang, they danced, they beat out the liveliest measures on their drums, until the Creator could hold out no longer.

'You sing and dance so well, you are so full of joy in life – I cannot let you go empty-handed! Take this corner of the earth that I was keeping for myself, settle here, be fruitful and multiply!'

So it was that the Creator took up his abode in the heavens, and the Georgians found themselves in possession of Eden.¹

The small mountainous country with its fertile plains and upland pastures was a prey from the earliest time to invaders greedy for conquest or plunder, as well as a battlefield in wars between powerful neighbours. It is bounded in the North by the Caucasus range, in the west by the Black Sea, and in the south by the marches of Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan. To the south-east lies Iran and to the east, between Georgia and the Caspian Sea, the Republic of Daghestan. For long periods under the monarchy the country was split into two kingdoms – a division which greatly lessened the Georgians' power to resist aggression. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, successive kings laid the foundations of unity between the several provinces; when the great King David the Builder came to the throne in 1089 the political unification of the nation had been established.

The two natural divisions of the country, the kingdoms of Eastern and Western Georgia, had always lain within different spheres of influence. There had been Greek settlements from remote antiquity in the western kingdom of Colchis, which later came under the sway of the empires of Rome and Byzantium. The eastern kingdom, Iberia, lay on the border of the mighty Persian empire. Thus Greece and Rome in the west, and Persia in the east, played an extensive part in shaping Georgia's destiny, as did the Arabs and later the Mongols and Turks, who came to invade the little kingdom in successive waves of conquest. In 1801 the united kingdom was annexed to the empire of the Tzars. It is today a Republic of the Soviet Union.

Christianity came to Georgia in 337, and became a rallying point in the people's constant battle for national independence. From the time of the Arab conquest there was continuous pressure on the Georgians to adopt the Moslem faith. In spite of this religious conflict, however, there are passages in the Georgian Chronicle – as elsewhere – to indicate that beneath the surface of political opposition there often existed close and friendly relations between Christians and Moslems.

Translations were a form of literary expression that could cross the lines of political, religious or military adversaries with a freedom not possible for original work. Moreover, these were by no means the severely literal renderings that modern scholarship demands, but often a re-creation of the source material in new form and clothing. An early example of this process is *Balavariani*, a story based on the life of the Buddha but transposed into Christian terminology, describing the conversion of India to Christianity. This work of Georgian literature (translated by Professor D. M. Lang as *The Wisdom of Balahvar*), which contains many interesting passages, is believed to have been adapted in the ninth century from an Arabic source.

Pavle Ingorokva gives valuable data on the place of Moslems in medieval Christian Georgia, as for example that Moslem poets of the twelfth century composed odes in honour of Queen Tamar and other Georgian sovereigns.⁷ The reign of King David IV, the Builder, 1089–1125, great-grandfather of Queen Tamar, is of particular interest in this respect. A great military commander, he drove the Arabs out of Georgia after four centuries of Arab rule and recovered the capital, Tbilisi, for the Georgian crown. In the following year he liberated the Armenian capital of Ani from the Turks and annexed it to Georgia. These and other military successes were due in part to his reorganization of the army, with emphasis on training and discipline, and largely also to his statesmanship, completing the long task of unifying the Georgian lands and bringing the Church under the

authority of the State. Although Georgia was a Christian country, there were a number of Moslems among the population. Under David's rule

.... Moslems were by no means subject to persecution. King David spared their clergy, protected their merchants and formed ties of friendship with Moslem poets and philosophers. There were many Moslems living in the capital of Tbilisi, and David IV granted them various privileges. He forbade the Christians to do anything which might offend the religious sensibilities of their Moslem fellow-citizens, or disturb them in the practice of their religion

The King was well versed in the teaching of Islam, and took part in theological discussions on themes from the Koran with the Qadi of Ganja. On Fridays, attended by the Crown Prince, he would go to the great mosque, listen to the prayers, the reading from the Koran and the sermon, and distribute alms to the clergy. He built a community centre for Moslem and Sufi poets and provided the means to maintain it.³

In addition to his qualities as a soldier and statesman, David IV was highly cultivated, and learned in a wide range of subjects. His life shows a striking contrast, which will be seen again in the reign of Queen Tamar, between the vigorous and effective military action that the well-being of his people demanded, and a wise and humane attitude in matters of administration.

The word *Sufi*, which occurs in the passage quoted above, is used by different writers in more than one sense. Sufism is often identified with the mysticism of Islam. 'Others hold that Sufism is a natural development of the ascetic tendencies which are essentially Mohammedan though not entirely independent of Christianity Asin Palacios holds that originally Sufism was an imitation of Christian oriental monasticism and that later its pantheistic elements developed from Neo-Platonism.'⁴ Other, and stranger, definitions can be found. The Sufis' own writings however make it clear that for them mystical experience is not an end in itself – any more than the flow of blood through the body is halted after its purification in the lungs. They are here, as they have always been, to serve humanity – to show people the Way to transcend ordinary limitations and realize their true nature as beings formed in the image of their Creator.

It is not, then, always certain what a writer has in mind in using the word *Sufi*. When a Georgian king was held captive in Persia, the Persian shah was referred to in a letter as 'the Sufi'; there the word may have meant simply 'the Moslem', or possibly 'the Persian'. In the case of the academy built by King David for 'Moslem poets and Sufis', however, it seems

probable that his chronicler used it in a wider connotation, closer to that of a seventeenth century scholar: ‘The Sufis are poets and lovers. According to the ground in which their teaching grows, they are soldiers, administrators or physicians ...’⁵ Both as administrator and military commander, David IV’s response to the demands of his time appears to have been that of a man of exceptional power and vision.

King David was buried at the entrance to the monastery of Gelati. The monastery and cathedral, which he built, stand on a wooded mountainside outside Kutaisi, the ancient capital of Western Georgia. The academy that he founded there became a *studium generale* where literature and philosophy, theology and the sciences were studied. These studies were carried out under the direction of a Neo-Platonist scholar Ioane Petritzi, a Georgian educated in Athens and at the Mangana Academy in Constantinople, whom David installed to work there.

Petritzi’s best-known work is his translation of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, with an extensive commentary. He translated many philosophical works, principally Neo-Platonist, with the aim of reconciling the ideas of the great classical thinkers with the central message of Christianity. His broad humanist outlook was in advance of his time and brought him into conflict with the Georgian Church orthodoxy, until David IV eventually established him at Gelati. He was versed in rhetoric and geometry, astronomy and metaphysics, and set down some of the most important elements in Georgian grammar. One of his few original works is *The Ladder of Virtues* – thirty steps towards Faith, from the first step of Renouncing the World, through Repentance, Poverty, Silence, Wakefulness, Self-Knowledge and other attainments. Both in his philosophy and his literary style, Petritzi – ‘sun of the Georgians’, ‘wise in all things’ – had a lasting influence on Georgian thought and literature, especially marked in the eighteenth century. He founded one of the three schools of Georgian translation – an art in which his fellow-countrymen have distinguished themselves throughout their history. There can have been few, if any, important works of literature or learning not known to them in their own language. Today in the Department of Translation in Tbilisi University both the theory and practice of the art are studied.

David IV freed his country from foreign domination and laid the foundations of an era of peace, order and prosperity. On those foundations his great-granddaughter Tamar, who reigned from 1184 to 1213, raised the kingdom to a height of military and economic power, territorial expansion and cultural development unsurpassed in its history. At the end of the twelfth century the territories subject to the Georgian crown extended from Trebizond on the Black Sea to Derbend on the Caspian coast, and later

included Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia maintained close relations with Byzantium; there was intermarriage between the royal and imperial houses. Queen Tamar is a figure now clothed in legend, but underlying it is a body of facts which point to a powerful civilizing force at work in her time. We see the paradox in her reign already noted in that of her ancestor, David the Builder – a contrast between the martial vigour that she inspired in her people, and the gentleness she is reported to have shown in her personal life and in her administration.

In the Georgian Chronicle it is recorded that the army, under the command of Tamar's consort David Soslan, fought continuous campaigns both offensive and defensive to secure their country's independence and military supremacy. As in the reign of David IV, their achievements called for a high degree of diplomatic as well as military ability, to control the feudal lords and the Orthodox priesthood, who wielded considerable power. At the same time, Tamar's chronicler records that 'she did not become angered with her vizirs or her soldiers, showing the favours of a parent to those who merited them',⁶ and that during her reign no one was flogged or executed at her orders. She is said to have been pious and devout; such expressions however were often no more than a convention in the annals of a sovereign's reign.

The prosperous and stable conditions of Tamar's reign were fertile soil for the growth of art, literature and scholarship. Among the circle of poets at her court was Shota Rustaveli, composer of Georgia's greatest classic *The Knight in Panther Skin*. At the same period, Chakhrukhadze was at work on his famed *Tamariani*, a lyric anthology of odes to the Queen and her consort – a virtuoso performance, a sparkling display of erudition and poetic talent. There are points of likeness between the two works, such as allusions to Greek philosophy and legend, and to the Persian romances *Vis and Ramin* and *Layla and Majnun*.

Both poets write from a religious outlook far broader than that of Christian orthodoxy. They work in different metres – one is a lyric poet, the other epic – and both display brilliant technical accomplishment in their versification. Within exacting confines of rhyme, stress and assonance their verse flows in a glorious cascade of sound which often conveys the sense even when the words are obscure. 'Not with random step shall the lover pursue his calling,' Rustaveli says in his Prologue,⁷ and the impression made by these poems does not appear to be produced at hazard. Like other young, men of rank, Rustaveli and Chakhrukhadze would have had a thorough grounding in the classics – the literature and philosophy of Greece – either in Athens or at one of the academies in Georgia. Allusions in the poems show that they were also familiar with works of Persian and Arabic

literature. It may have been part of their education – as it has until recent years with classical scholars in the West – to study the technique of versification.

After Chakhrukhadze had composed the *Tamariani* he left Tamar's court and travelled to every part of the then known world. He 'appeared in Iran and the Arabian countries as a wandering minstrel, reciting his verses in Iranian and Arabic'.⁸ It is not known what impelled him to take up that way of life; but from his writing and what is known it appears that he lived and worked as others did who followed the Sufi path, carrying out whatever task he was given to the best of his powers, and learning from it what he needed to learn.

Unsurpassed in Georgian literature is Shota Rustaveli's *Knight in Panther Skin* – a work having many features that a student of Sufism will recognize. The poet observes the principle of 'time, place and people' in speaking to his fellow countrymen in terms that all could understand, with a story based on their own conditions of life and allusions to Georgian history and the various religious beliefs extant among them, in a form which would enable it to survive through oral transmission, as well as in manuscripts vulnerable to loss or destruction. This magnificent work is widely known and quoted and its influence felt up to the present day – almost eight centuries after it was written. It has been translated into all the major languages of the West, and also into Japanese and Arabic.

The story opens in a kingdom called Arabia – thought to represent Georgia – where the aging King Rostevan sets his daughter Tinatin on the throne, just as Tamar, the reigning queen of Georgia, had been enthroned by her father as co-regent in his old age. Rostevan and his young commander-in-chief Avtandil are engaged in a shooting contest when they see a mysterious stranger, who disappears before they can discover who he is. He kills a number of Rostevan's men when they try to pursue him, and the king is distracted with grief. His daughter Tinatin summons Avtandil, who cherishes a secret love for her. She charges him, as her knight, to set forth and find the stranger, promising to wed no other until he returns.

Leaving his faithful squire Shermadin in charge of his affairs Avtandil sets out, and after a long and wearisome search at last comes up with the knight clad in panther skin. The strange 'knight' proves to be a prince of India, Tariel by name. He is roaming the world in search of his beloved, the princess Nestan-Darejan, who has been carried off by demons. Avtandil swears an oath of friendship to Tariel, in the Georgian tradition of 'sworn brotherhood' – an important element in the story, as it has always been in the lives of the Georgian people. He returns to Arabia to report his discovery to Tinatin and King Rostevan, and again sets forth – after failing

to obtain the king's leave – to rejoin Tariel and aid him in his search. After many adventures the captive princess is found and set free and the two royal couples marry amid great rejoicing.

Other characters in the story are portrayed with vigorous realism. The first clue to Nestan-Darejan's fate is given by a third and lesser prince, Nuradin Pridon, who has seen her for a brief moment; he joins Tariel and Avtandil in their quest. They learn more of her from a merchant's wife, the amorous Phatman, who falls victim to Avtandil's charms – an episode that recalls the legend of Jason and Medea in Colchis.

All Rustaveli's personages are clearly drawn, recognizable in their features. While the story moves in the realm of allegory, it is given a dimension of actuality by links with the everyday world. The central theme, stated in the Prologue, is that of the troubadours of Western Europe in their lyrics of courtly love: 'I speak of the Love that is highest Love that exalts and gives man wings for upward flight.' 'What is the knowledge of the Sages worth,' Avtandil asks in the noble phrases of his Testament, 'if we do not act on it? The purpose of their teaching was to perfect our nature and raise us to the order of the heavenly beings "Love ennobles us!"'⁹ He is speaking here of friendship as a form of the love that is the way to self-perfection. Rustaveli also praises love in other forms, human love as leading to the divine. The Sufi Way has been called the way of love.

Although the poem is infused with religious feeling – Avtandil's invocation to the Sun, the Moon and the five planets is one of its finest passages – Rustaveli makes no concession to Christian orthodoxy. There are two or three quotations from the Bible but no mention of Christ or the Virgin Mary, or of any Christian ritual. This suggests a possible explanation of the much-discussed line in the Prologue:

'This Persian tale I found in the Georgian tongue.'¹⁰ Reference to an anonymous source which could not be identified was a device sometimes employed for protection, giving a writer freedom to express advanced or unorthodox views that might lay him open to attack by Church or State. Other explanations have been suggested, one being that it was the fashion at the time to do things in the Persian manner, much as it was in England later to copy Italian styles of architecture and French couture. In spite of lengthy research, no single Persian tale has ever been found as Rustaveli's source. A writer, however, may take material from a variety of sources and create from it something that is new, individual and his own. In the Middle Ages, moreover, the concept of original creative work had not the importance attributed to it today. The great stories of the world reappeared in different dress over an immense range of time and space, adapted and reworked to suit the circumstances.

A Georgian scholar, Gaioz Imedashvili, observes that Georgian culture and thought have always had a double orientation, facing towards the empires of Greece and Rome in the West, and Persia in the East. After the advent of Christianity the bias swung towards the West, and Professor Imedashvili concludes that one should look westward rather than eastward for the inspiration of *The Knight in Panther Skin*. However, as we have seen, there was much interchange between the two cultures, and the gulf between their respective viewpoints is probably less wide than is sometimes assumed.

Many features in this poem are characteristic of the literature of chivalry and courtly love that appeared before and during Rustaveli's lifetime in Western Europe. There is a notable likeness between the influence of the King Arthur cycle of legends on the civilization of England, and that of Rustaveli's poem in Georgia. One of the qualities in Rustaveli's list of those that a lover should possess is youth – *siqme*, an old Georgian word corresponding to the Provençal *jovens*. In a study of the relations between Rustaveli's ideas and those of the Provençal troubadours, the Russian scholar S. Serebryakov points out that the concept expressed in both words is that of the Arabic *futuwwa* – 'all noble qualities in a young man'.¹¹ According to A.J. Denomy, this was a Sufi concept that originated at the birth of Islam in ancient Arabia. There is now much evidence to connect the poetry of the troubadours and minnesingers – like the many fables and tales beginning to circulate in Western Europe at the beginning of the thirteenth century – with Arabic sources in Moslem Spain. In philosophy, science and medicine Arab learning led the field. The first of the troubadours of Provence, William VIII Duke of Aquitaine, knew Arabic well and introduced Arabic poetry and ideas of romantic love into southern France. The Georgians – who had always been accomplished translators – were accustomed to translating direct from Arabic, and the work of leading writers and scholars of the Arab world was thus accessible to them. The thought of such writers as El Ghazzali penetrated to Georgia as it did to the West.

Among works of Western medieval literature contemporary with Rustaveli's story of Tariel, one that compares with it closely is the story of Parzival and the Grail. Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* appeared not long after *The Knight in Panther Skin*, a story with a background of court life and feudal society much resembling those of the period in Georgia. Both works tell of knighthood, feats of arms and noble aspirations. Both refer to an unknown source.

The two poems are alike in another respect. For the first part of their lives the heroes Tariel and Parzival are blessed with good fortune; they have the world at their feet. Then comes a moment in which they are found

wanting. Thenceforward a train of sorrow and disaster ensues for both. The occasion is one when speech is called for, and each of the heroes fails to speak. Parzival, dazzled by the sight of the Grail, fails to ask how it can be used. Tariel, horror-struck at the proposal to marry his beloved to the Persian crown prince, says nothing to oppose it.

Both young men behaved in obedience to a command. Parzival as a boy was fond of asking questions, until his tutor taught him that it was discourteous and unbecoming in a knight. Tariel had been charged by the king's daughter, in accordance with the code of lovers, not to reveal his love for her. They obeyed; yet their neglect to speak when speech was needed proved culpable, a sin to be expiated before they could attain their desire.

Like a composer of music, Rustaveli often repeats a theme with variations. Later in the poem the vizir Sograt, unwilling to bear a message from Avtandil to the king, quoted Ecclesiastes, reiterating the idea that 'there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak'.

In poetry all over the known world in Rustaveli's lifetime a single theme was dominant: the power of love to ennoble men. Not only courtly love but all kinds of earthly love were regarded as a ladder to the spiritual, a concept going back to Plato. This found expression in different languages, in countries far apart, like the traces left by an unknown being in its passage over the earth – or a scatter of stars all taking their light from one invisible sun. What was that sun, where was that source of light? From what we know of the Sufis an answer may be sought in their tradition, which 'between about 700 AD and 1500 AD was based upon love, operated through a dynamic of love, had its manifestation through ordinary human life, poetry and work'.¹²

Persia at that epoch had entered a period of literary renaissance. The language was regenerated from Pahlavi, and a school of Sufi poets came into being to do work of unsurpassed brilliance. Two Persian poets in particular appear likely to have influenced – possibly to have been influenced by – Rustaveli. There are features in the story of the hero Rostom in Firdausi's *Shah-Nameh* which are found also in the story of Tariel: the panther's skin, the faithful maidservant, the disguise of a merchant. Motifs such as these would naturally have been familiar, through copying and translation, to poets and writers in many countries.

A Persian epic translated into Georgian in 1188, the year in which it was composed – a few years earlier than *The Knight in Panther Skin* – was a version of the love story of Layla and Majnun. This allegory of love, widely known throughout the East, was again put into verse in the fifteenth century by Jami, one of the great exponents of Sufi ideas. The earlier version was by Rustaveli's contemporary Nizami of Ganja, a Persian born on Georgia's

Persian frontier. There is little doubt that this poem, if not the poet himself, was known to Rustaveli. The two works – *Layla and Majnun* and *The Knight in Panther Skin* – are in many respects alike, in others dissimilar. In one version of *Layla and Majnun*, quoted in Suhrawardi's *Gifts of Knowledge*, the lover Majnun faints when he catches a glimpse of Layla's skirt through the raised flap of her tent; and Tariel likewise swoons away when he first beholds Nestan-Darejan through the curtain of her pavilion. The same incident occurs in the Persian *Visramiani*, one of the earliest works to be translated into Georgian, when the curtain of Vis' litter is blown aside in a gust of wind, revealing her to Ramin's gaze. Such similarities suggest that Rustaveli was familiar with the conventions common to love poetry of the period.

Layla and Majnun, in Nizami's version, probably comes closer than any known work to that 'Persian tale found in the Georgian tongue' of Rustaveli's Prologue. He states in another verse that *mijnuri*, the Georgian word for a lover, is derived from the Arabic *majnun*, love-maddened. In Sufi poetry, the highest spiritual concepts have often been expressed in the symbolism of earthly love.

The natural shape of things and the laws which govern them – the cosmic pattern of creation – have been given expression from time to time in the structure of buildings, decorative design, stories and other arts. This is illustrated in an article on Georgian music by Professor Yvette Grimaud:

Georgian master builders constructed their edifices to accord with different 'registers of perception'. In ancient churches the register of hearing plays an important part. The way the building is constructed sets in motion a harmonic progression of indefinite nuances, part of a whole in which every movement (every rhythm) extends to the 'inaudible' – perceptible perhaps for one who can learn to 'hear with the inner ear of the heart', and then discovers a new time which brings him 'face to face with the present'.¹³

'The path of the dervish is in qualitative exactitude,' wrote the poet Hafiz of Shiraz. The impression given by *The Knight in Panther Skin* is that of a work composed to produce a specific, foreseeable effect. The story and versification are such as to please people of all sorts and conditions. The verse, easier than prose to memorize and less open to distortion than the outline of a story, ensured its survival among a people of whom few, when it first appeared, were literate. It was a casket marvellously fashioned to guard and transmit the jewel of the doctrine of love.

In structure – apart from the decorative elements of metre and rhyme, poetic imagery and description – the poem has something in common with the ancient Hindu religious epic *Ramayana*, the story of the lovers Rama

and Sita. A feature of Rustaveli's poem unusual in romantic poetry is that his heroine Nestan-Darejan is rescued from captivity not by one hero, her lover Tariel, but three. Through masterly characterization, the three are clearly distinguished from one another. 'All men are not equal,' Rustaveli writes. 'There is a vast difference between man and man.' Tariel, even in dire distress, is recognized by all who see him as a personage of the highest distinction, almost god-like, a luminous being. He wears the skin of a wild animal variously identified as tiger, panther and leopard. In a famous statue of the Hindu god Shiva, depicting him as Lord of the Dance, the god is wearing breeches of tiger's skin. Tariel, however, in spite of his god-like nature, is at a loss in relation to the world, unable to cope with events. He is passive when action is needed, silent when he ought to speak. When he tries to atone for his silence by killing Nestan's Persian suitor he brings down disaster on her and on himself. He is saved from death and aided in his search by Avtandil, also an illustrious figure, although not on the same plane as Tariel. Avtandil is practical, good at dealing with people and affairs; he is governed by reason, and never loses his head as Tariel does. Both he and Tariel travel alone, unattended except for Tariel's faithful maidservant Asmat. The third hero, Nuradin Pridon, is also a prince. His kingdom is small, and he is plainly subordinate to the other two. He is not alone: he brings to their enterprise a troop of seasoned warriors with arms and equipment, and it is he who gives Tariel his swift-footed horse.

In the story of Rama and Sita, with its wealth of subsidiary characters and plots, something of the same pattern can be discerned. Sita is taken captive by demons – creatures of the same sort as those who carried off Nestan-Darejan. Rama goes to her rescue attended by his devoted brother Lakshman, with whom he has lived as an outlaw in the forest, without followers or possessions. They are aided in the rescue of Sita from the demon's stronghold by a third ally, the monkey chief and his troop of well-trained monkeys. Other likenesses between the two epics can be found. The monkey king had seen Sita being carried off by the demons and was able to give Rama news of her: Pridon had seen the captive Nestan in the hands of slaves and gave Tariel his first clue to her fate. Rama fought beside the king of the monkeys and helped him to regain his kingdom, gaining his allegiance in return: Tariel fought beside Pridon to recover Pridon's heritage, and later received aid from him.

There is no evidence that Rustaveli knew the story of Rama, although in view of the way that legends and stories travel it is by no means improbable. It may still be asked whether the basic structure of both works is derived from a like understanding of natural laws. On the scale of an individual, the heart and the mind are single entities – like Rama and Tariel, Lakshman and

Avtandil. The body, like Pridon's army and the troops of the monkey king, has many parts. All three elements must unite to bring the soul out from her dark prison into the light of consciousness.

Close on the Golden Age in Georgia there followed an age of darkness. Not many years after the death of Queen Tamar in 1213 the country was invaded by the Tatars from Central Asia, and subsequently by the Mongols, first under Genghis Khan and again under Tamerlane. These shattering blows were followed by centuries of war with the Turks in the West, and the Persians in the East; and it was not until the seventeenth century that the nation's internal economy was sufficiently restored to make possible a revival of cultural activity. A minor renaissance then took place, chiefly under the aegis of Vakhtang VI, one of the most enlightened of the Georgian kings. He gave encouragement to the arts and sciences and did much to revive the country's ruined economy; he introduced important innovations and reforms, drew up a legal code, installed the first printing-press in Tbilisi, and collected and edited the annals of the Georgian kings. He received the throne of Georgia at the hands of the Shah of Persia – the same who was referred to in a letter as 'the Sufi'. He was later invited to the Persian court at Ispahan, and received with great ceremony. The Shah pressed him to embrace Islam. On his refusal, he was kept in captivity in Persia. As a captive, he seems to have enjoyed considerable freedom, being active in diplomacy, studying chemistry and making translations into Georgian, among them the *Tales of Bidpai* known as *Kalila and Dimna*.

One of the most celebrated Georgian writers, Sulikhan-Saba Orbeliani, was Vakhtang's uncle, tutor and lifelong counsellor. His *Book of Wisdom and Lies* (a title which has rather the meaning of 'wisdom in fantasy') is a collection of fables, proverbs and precepts related to the education of a king's son. Since Orbeliani was tutor to Vakhtang in his boyhood, it may well be that he made the anthology to use in the course of his instruction. The Georgian word *araki* for these tales has the meaning of allegory, and also of teaching-story. Several of them are found, with variations, in collections of Sufi tales: *The Man and the Snake*, *The Ploughman*, *the Weaver and the Tailor*, *The Caliph and the Arab* and others. Some are of purely Georgian origin. Orbeliani, a nobleman and a courtier, had spent some years as a monk and lived in poverty and hardship. He well understood the preoccupations of the common man, and his stories are full of earthy incident, comedy and melodrama.

Orbeliani was sent to Europe on a diplomatic mission to obtain the aid of the French King Louis XIV and the Pope to liberate King Vakhtang from captivity in Persia. It was on that occasion that he used the word 'Sufi' in a letter. The word does not occur in *A Book of Wisdom and Lies*, although the

book undoubtedly contains Sufi ideas – not only in the stories themselves but in their setting and presentation. They are told by five well-contrasted characters, each of whom might represent a facet of human nature. The vizir, who at first appears as the wisest, does not hesitate to offer the mysterious stranger Leon his own position at court, apparently recognizing Leon as in some way a superior being. The relations between the five – the king, his son, the vizir, the prince’s tutor and the eunuch change and develop in entertaining and often startling interplay, as a background to the tales.

One of a group of talented eighteenth-century poets was David Guramishvili, whose work was largely devoted to events in the history of his country. He wrote of the reign of Vakhtang VI in the early part of the century with a profound sense of the tragic fate that Georgia had suffered in the past and might in the future meet again. In his poem *Georgia’s Tribulations* he urges his fellow-countrymen never to forget the value of knowledge:

Learning is yours until your dying day.
All that you learn remains with you for
No one can take it from you,
Nothing can part you from it.
Other possessions can be snared
And snatched away.
A man who has not knowledge
Will suffer in this transitory world.

This verse is aptly quoted on the first day of the school year. The phrase ‘this transitory world’ or ‘this fleeting life’, in Georgian a single word, is much used by Rustaveli in an older form: a concept now almost forgotten in the West, but part of a common world-picture in earlier times.

As well as these main landmarks in Georgian literature there are other literary forms that suggest an orientation towards an ancient tradition of wisdom. Variants can be found of stories known all over the world, and Georgian folklore is an oyster-bed yielding many pearls. The story of Cinderella has a Georgian counterpart in the well-loved romance *Eteriani*, the subject of a brilliant opera by the late Zakaria Paliashvili. Foxes, snakes and donkeys figure largely in popular tales: Mulla Nasrudin and Uncle Remus are very much at home in Georgia, if under different names.

Other stories belong to the country itself and are grounded in a particular region. One such legend is the subject of *The Snake Eater*, a poem by a highly popular nineteenth-century poet, Vazha Pshavela, who lived and worked in the mountains ‘in a part of the country where the tribes continued to live as they had in ancient times, in timelessness or rather in a

sort of absolute present where the absent have their place, yet without any effacing of the difference between the here and the hereafter¹⁴ The same story in a different version is also retold by the late Konstantine Gamsakhurdia. In this the hero, Mindia, is carried off by the Patron of Beasts, a Pan-like figure who ‘scratched his goat-like beard with his hoof’, to the Land of the Cuckoos.¹⁵ There he is given a brew of white snakes, and after eating it acquires wisdom and is entirely transformed. He has become a being who casts no shadow. ‘The sky, the earth, the forests begin to speak to him He realizes that every living and every inanimate being has a language.’ Sickened by the bloodshed and savagery of tribal warfare, he finds himself unable to kill or harm any living creature, even to hunt for food. He refuses to eat meat – the staple diet of his tribe. The young men, his companions, jeer at him and his fate works itself out.

This intuitive sense of unity with nature is deeply characteristic of the Georgians and is expressed in many ways in their literature. The first chronicler of Queen Tamar relates that she had ‘a magnetic power of attraction for wild beasts. One day the Shah of Shirvan sent her a lion cub that he had reared, already well grown it laid its head on the Queen’s bosom and caressed her with its tongue’.¹⁶ In the lives of early Georgian monks and hermits, incidents involving animals and birds are described. In his Inaugural Lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Professor D. M. Lang quotes one with a typically Georgian touch. A dragon infesting the cave of a saint and his disciple is consumed in flames by a thunderbolt from the hand of God. The saint ‘protests vigorously to Heaven against this violence to one of his own protégés, and has to be pacified by an angel sent specially by the Almighty Himself’.¹⁷

Many themes in Sufi tales are found, in different forms, in Georgian. Somebody meets with unexpected good fortune and something is gained from him in return; a person is offered advice – often by an animal or an old woman – to meet a difficulty he has not foreseen; universally familiar features occur such as swords to be pulled out of stones, magic carpets and rings, captive princesses.

There is a saying in the East that a guest is sent from God. A guest at a Georgian banquet may be asked whether his parents are still living and, whether they are alive or died long ago, a toast is drunk to them. The story is told of a young man of blameless life who died and went to Heaven. There, looking about him, he saw groups of people drinking, seated among the clouds. One group who invited him to join them turned out to be his ancestors. After a time he asked:

‘How is it that however much you drink your wine jug is always full?’

Whenever somebody on earth drank to them, they told him, the jug was refilled: an echo of the Prophet's saying, quoted by El Ghazzali in *The Alchemy of Happiness*: 'The prayers of children profit their parents when the latter are dead' 'The ritual of toasts at a Georgian party, although it cannot be called a form of literature, is in direct line of descent from an early literary form. That is the *keba*, a speech or poem of praise, thought to be derived from one of the earliest forms of Arabic literature. Both Rustaveli and Chakhrukhadze repeatedly use the phrase, 'It would need the eloquence of the Sages and the harp of David to praise her!'. In *The Knight in Panther Skin* the leader of a merchant caravan, described as an educated man, greets Avtandil with an encomium 'according to custom'. On another occasion there is a lyrical passage when Pridon breaks into a paean of praise on hearing Tariel's name. Today, occasions such as New Year's Day, the beginning of the academic year or the first fall of snow are celebrated in a Georgian newspaper with a page of poems, many by unknown writers.

The custom also survives as a feature of banquets and feasts, both at formal gatherings and in a circle of family or friends. A toastmaster, the *tamada*, is appointed – somebody other than the host. He proposes toasts to peace, friendship, Georgia, the guests' native lands; and it is also his task to give a toast to each person present. At a large party this might become something of an endurance test; but it is often interspersed by fine polyphonic singing in a highly developed style; and when it grows late the principal guest may use a formula of thanks to bring the proceedings to an end. The *tamada*, sometimes adopting a special ritual intonation, makes a point of bringing out people's qualities and achievements, in the way that we reserve for an obituary notice. Here, however, the guests are present in the flesh and able to enjoy hearing about themselves. Apart from being an entertaining way of performing introductions and getting through a great many bottles of wine, the custom has other beneficial effects. Everyone goes home not only well wined and dined, but having had nourishment of another sort – attention. Faces that were tired, listless, anxious or sad light up, sometimes to unexpected beauty, when for a few moments they are the focus of attention as the *tamada* recites their praise, even though everyone knows it is no more than a formality. It can, of course, have a different effect when somebody hears himself extolled for qualities he knows he does not possess.

The speeches and replies help to keep alive the art of rhetoric, of expressiveness in speech. The Georgians have a profound and ardent love for their language, which in the words of a tenth-century song 'contains all kinds of mystery in its depths'.¹⁸ As one Georgian put it, 'language is the

nature of man'. Many are natural poets and adorn their speeches with quotations and impromptu verse.

Georgia throughout her history has been no stranger to the ideas and culture of East and West. Indeed, the principal currents of thought from various directions flowed strongly through her territories at a time when Sufi teaching was widely diffused in Europe and Western and Central Asia. *The Knight in Panther Skin*, the masterpiece of Georgian literature, although deeply rooted in its homeland's history and tradition, is not a work of purely national interest but part of the whole body of medieval literature. A traveller in Georgia may gain the impression that here is a country where the blessing of an influence from another dimension than any in ordinary life has once been manifest. Traces of it can be found in literature, as also in music, architecture and the arts. Its imprint is in some ways impalpable as a taste of honey in the air: it is in people's attitudes and expressions, manners and customs, turns of phrase, unexpected notes of gentleness or laughter. In this brief survey we have tried to indicate what appears to be clear evidence of Sufi thought in Georgian literature – literature which plays a more active part in everyday life than we are accustomed to see. Beyond what is clear, this literature has other features that point to Sufi influence, giving the impression that at some time in the past the doctrine of love held sway, with a power that can still be felt. In terms of the present day, its effect could be described as skill in the art of living.

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