

Understanding of Cosmopolitanism in Georgian Literary Thinking: From Goethe to Vazha-Pshavela

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Abstract A very important publicist work by Georgian classic writer of 19th-20th centuries Vazha-Pshavela — “Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism” was published in 1905 and became one of the most discussed topics among the intellectual society of Georgia. The publication of the essay with this kind of content was a considerable fact in the beginning of 20th century when the controversy between the different countries and people revealed other types of essential controversies like: National and Colonialist determinations, Free thinking and Ideology, Spirituality and Scientific-Technical progress. Due to all these circumstances Vazha-Pshavela’s idea was assessed as a declaration of writer’s strong position, expressed in his fictional works as well. But, was it just a declaration? Maybe it was a prophetic warning of the danger which was going to threaten regularly not only Georgia, but some other small countries throughout the world? What was the attitude of Georgian society towards the writer’s position and are there any analogies in the western thinking?

Key words Cosmopolitism; Patriotism; Values; Intercultural communications; Identity

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Literary heritage of Georgian classic writer Vazha-Pshavela (1861-1915) with the problems raised in it and its objectives is a valuable Georgian reflection of a late European Realism, however, due to the tradition established on different stages of the development of Georgian literature this model of reflection is as well characterised by usual corrections and references: The new trends elaborated within the frames of Georgian late Realism merged not only with the tradition that took shape in the depth of European Realism of 19th century, but also the realistic context of Georgia, highlighting a very interesting spectrum of problems, such as:

Humans and their mission in the world;
The individual will of a person and a society;
“One’s own space” as a marker of national identity.

If we approach from this angle some central texts in Vazha-Pshavela’s oeuvre — *Aluda Ketelaui*, *Host and Guest*, *Gogotur and Apshina*, *Snake-Eater* — we will have to admit that despite different storylines, the untameable aspiration of humans locked up in an immense universe to find their mission, the unabated desire to struggle for personal dignity, and the undeserved pain from the fatal identification with “one’s own space” connects and cements those texts with each other. There are numerous reasons that make the author respect the main characters of those texts: They are people embellished with rare qualities — notions that seem to be worn out, but are absolutely indispensable are important for them; notions like: “belief,” “freedom,” “love,” “devotion,” “spiritual firmness,” and “the sense of native soil” (Kiknadze 149-150). They are convinced that: A person must be true first to his own personality and then to others; he should be honourable first to his own conscience and then to the public; he should be loyal first to his own land and then to the land of others. All those characters are given shape within the real Georgian context. However, they are not “one of many,” but “one among many.” Spiritual projection becomes outlined as the only projection of personal freedom and the sense of homeland is based not on the vision of masses, but the moral criteria of individuals:

I am the Home with my Dignity;

My Dignity defines my Home;

I move around the world with my Dignity, and therefore, with my Home.

As Vazha-Pshavela would say, the main thing is that the deeds of such characters (people) are as useful for humankind (world) as they are useful and reasonable for their homeland (home).

So who is Vazha-Pshavela: The greatest cosmopolitan or a man of genius motivated by national self-consciousness?

Let us recall Marko Juvan's interpretation of the introduction of one of the most cosmopolitan term *Weltliteratur* (World literature), mentioned and established by Goethe in 1827:

In Goethe's case, the historical consciousness of literature's worldwide scope thus had rather peripheral, partly nationally biased origin, notwithstanding its cosmopolitan pedigree and claims to universalism. The intellectual background of the idea was definitely established by post-Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, a belief that in "their essence" people are equal, regardless of affiliations to various states, languages, religions, classes, or cultures. Since the eighteenth century, cosmopolitanism has informed the lifestyle of urban intellectual elites as well as conceptually inspired ethics and international law, economic theories of the free market, political science, the arts, and the humanities (Juvan 2010a). Coining the phrase *Weltliteratur*, Goethe — as Marx and Engels later would — expected "world literature" to transcend national parochialism through cosmopolitan cultural exchange. Pursuing much the same cosmopolitan goals as Immanuel Kant did in his *Perpetual Peace* (1795), but following a different path, Goethe also thought that knowledge of other languages and literatures, their deeper understanding, and openness to their influence would lead people from different countries to mutual understanding and peace. The ideologeme of world literature was invented to buffer the dangers of imperialism, culture wars, and economic competition between national entities in post-Napoleonic Europe. However, even Goethe fuelled his cosmopolitan idea with nationalist anxieties and goals; after all, his *Weltliteratur* aimed at the transnational promotion of German literature, which was facing strong international competitions and British or French cultural hegemony (Damrosch 2003: 8; Pizer 2000: 216; Casanova 1999: 63-64). Encouraged by the considerable foreign success of his works and enjoying an influential position in culturally prosperous Weimar, Goethe believed:

“There is being formed a universal world literature, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. All the nations review our work; they praise, censure, accept, and reject, imitate, and mispresent us, open or close their hearts to us. (73-74)¹

It seems that even one of the most cosmopolitan thinkers of the world and the author of the cosmopolitan and currently global term — *Weltliteratur*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, shaped the foundations of his cosmopolitanism on the basis of the layers of his national conscience and refused to forget even for a minute the mission of the national literature (in his case, German literature) in this large-scale literary model: Communications between literatures as a circulation of different linguistic and perceptive models are the main targets of Goethe’s cosmopolitan experiment.

Vazha-Pshavela is a thinker of the post-Goethe era. Unlike Goethe, who could only presuppose at the level of intuition prospects for the development of the term he had invented, Vazha-Pshavela could precisely see what results the voluntary interpretation of the cosmopolitan approach could produce. Despite the fact that he, together with his family and animals that sustained the family, lived in a half-ruined hut in a remote mountain area of turned into a province of the Russian Empire Georgia, rarely visited the city and was fully aware of the painful cultural weakness of his dishonoured country against the background of the global cultural and literary processes, he was strongly full of confidence in the potential of the Georgian culture and respected the country’s stubborn vital energy frequently kicked down due to historic ill fate.

Georgia in the 19th century was not indeed Germany. Promotion of the Georgian culture depended on the sentiments and moods at the imperial court in St Petersburg. Georgian writers were neither known nor translated. They were neither imitated nor condemned. They were just stewing in their own juice, which was quite bitter and unpalatable. However, this was happening not only in order to shout at each other and wake up the Georgian public that was slackened due to temporary liberal policy pursued by Russia in the second half of 19th century, but also in order not to lose contacts with the international literary process and to create its distinctive Georgian wing, which was to find itself in the spotlight of the world sooner or later as something ancient, valuable, and important.

Time and history have shown that Goethe’s idea tended to be directed on geographic expansion, but in Goethe’s times, it was unambiguously equal to Europacentrism and implied first and foremost European literature and, of course,

German literature as one of its major components. From the 19th century, the Goethean term indeed started to broaden its own historic and geographic scope and step by step reached out to all continents and cultures of the world (Marino 31)². The rise of capitalism accelerated the opening of national borders, which gradually increased chances of interaction between national literatures through translations and various types of cultural dialogue. Goethe's idea was that all these developments were to make all valuable cultural models equal irrespective of their linguistic and national origin instead of oppressing them. However, it was the threat of the disappearance of this important function of conscience that never left Vazha-Pshavela, a Georgian writer and thinker, in peace, because:

Georgia was isolated with double borders from the global cultural space - national border and border of Russian Empire;

He lived in the pragmatic era of rising capitalism and speedy scientific and technical progress;

He witnessed the speedy devaluation of spiritual and moral values of society of his time;

He encountered nihilism and the lack of faith;

He worried about the weakened patriotic spirit of Georgians.

And there were indeed grounds for fears. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were the first in the 19th century to respond to Goethe's theory with their "common property theory." They skilfully used the ideas of the great German author to introduce the main principle of the Marxist ideology. Marx and Engels transformed the principle of overcoming the short-sightedness characteristic of national cultures, which was part of Goethe's cosmopolitanism, into the theory of eliminating class differentiation, which posed a real threat of a utopia that was to come true. No one recalled that the Goethean idea of cosmopolitanism was based on national self-conscience and implied the latter's rise to the level of "overall humanism."

Only dozens of years later, René Wellek and Austin Warren reverted to national conscience and the Goethean theory of cosmopolitanism linked to the cultural and literary values. However, before that happened, the threat emanating from a distorted interpretation of the cosmopolitan idea was quite tangible and it is no surprise that it runs like a scarlet thread through the work by the Georgian humanist Vazha-Pshavela, *Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism*, published in 1905.

It is noteworthy that this essay meant for Georgian readers could successfully be referred to the whole of the contemporary world that was on the threshold

of great disappointments and the citizens who lived in the times of “dead God” (Nietzsche), revolutions, wars, and great disappointments. Vazha-Pshavela addressed everyone, absolutely everyone and not only Georgia that had become a province of Russia with its head bowed:

Some believe that genuine patriotism is contrary to cosmopolitanism, but this is a mistake. Every genuine patriot is a cosmopolitan just like every reasonable cosmopolitan (not those in our country) is a patriot. How? It is as follows: The person, who reasonably serves his own nation, trying to enhance his own homeland intellectually, materially, and morally, thus producing best members and friends of the whole humankind, promotes the development and well-being of the whole humankind. (104)

National energy is the support point of the essay by Vazha-Pshavela and all other values are based on it. Pascale Casanova wrote almost 150 years later: “Each writer’s position must necessarily be a double one, twice defined: each writer is situated once according to the position he or she occupies in a national space, and then once again according to the place that this occupies within the world space” (81). Vazha-Pshavela knew precisely back in 1905 that “all geniuses emerged and were raised on the national soil and grew to such a scale that even other nations accepted them as their own children. Correspondingly, geniuses found homelands outside their own homelands” (104).

Everything is in order up to this point: The projection of Vazha-Pshavel’s idea is in line with Goethe’s vision and his understanding of cosmopolitanism, but further on, the stream of the Georgian author’s thinking switches to some other route:

However, in spite of this, works by geniuses are more useful and appropriate on the national soil. Sons of no other country will be able to get as much pleasure from *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, particularly if they are translated, as the English. Why should we go on too long? Will sons of another country be able to get so much pleasure from *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* and understand it so well, no matter how good a translation they may read or how well they may speak Georgian, as Georgians themselves? Never. A genius as a personality and individual has his own homeland, which he loves and adores, but his work does not, because it belongs to the whole of humankind like science. (105)

On the one hand, Vazha-Pshavela refuses to recognise the omnipotence of translations, but on the other, he admits that they are necessary to make texts accessible to the world. The rhythm of Goethe's everyday life was defined by linguistic activities — reading in various languages, translations, studies in cultural distances, monitoring of the international receptions of his own works, and intellectual research, where translations played a major role in the creation of a universal literary space. Vazha-Pshavela was not so interested in such endeavours. He regarded translations as a means of communication rather than a means for the creation of a universal literary space, as he believed that translations provided an opportunity to any national literature to become available to readers in other countries and various national literatures were able to establish close contacts with each other precisely through translations. However, at the same time, he believed that high-quality reading was possible only in a national language.

If we recall one phrase by the founder of Dialogic Criticism, Mikhail Bakhtin, the depth of Vazha-Pshavela's idea will become more amazing:

It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly. ... A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closeness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. ... Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched. (334-335)

Boundaries do exist and they are observed in conditions of valuable dialogue. It is quite clear that according to Bakhtin, a cultural product does not belong only to the culture, within the boundaries of which it was created. It is part of an open intercultural space that is equal to the "great time" of history and enables any cultural item to undergo multiple reconstructions and renovations (both in content and perception) at every stage of the history of culture. Vazha-Pshavela's position is permeated with precisely these ideas: On the one hand, it is necessary to be engaged in dialogue between cultures and on the other, it is necessary to admit the threat of possible losses, which is, of course, due to the imperfection of translation or, to be more precise, due to the fact that it is impossible for one type of mentality to precisely reflect another type of mentality.

Patriotism is for Vazha-Pshavela a notion bearing very sharp markers: The

native tongue, historic past, and childhood. In other words, it is all that the “most global author,” Vladimir Nabokov, described as “inherited memory” years after (Nabokov 40).

Patriotism is a sentiment and cosmopolitanism is a result of thinking and it is very important to direct the thinking in a correct direction:

God save us from understanding cosmopolitanism as if everyone should renounce their nationality. In that case, the whole humankind will have to renounce their own selves. Every nation seeks to be free in order to be masters of their own fate, take care of themselves, and develop relying on their own force. Separated development of nations is an indispensable precondition for the development of humankind. (106)

Vazha-Pshavela's *Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism* was assertion and warning at the same time. It was moved not only by the pains of the country, but also a tragic perception of the overall crisis of values.

Notes

1. In this quotation Marko Juvan refers to the following works: Juvan, Marko “‘Peripherecentricism’: Geopolitics of Comparative Literatures between Ethocentrism and Cosmopolitanism.” In: *Bessiere, Jean and Judit Maar, Histoire de la littérature et jeux d'échange entre centres et périphéries: Les identités relatives des littératures*. Paris: Harmattan. 53-63, 2010; Damrosch, David “*What is World Literature?*” Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP. 2003; Pizer, John “Goethe's ‘World Literature’ Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization.” In: *Comparative Literature* 52.3:213-227. 2000; Casanova, Pascale “La République mondiale des Lettres.” Paris: Seuil. 1999.
2. We rely upon the Georgian translation of Adrian Marino's book - *Comparatism si teoria literaturii*, translated and published in Georgia in 2010.

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