

Homeland in the Poetry of Nik'oloz Baratašvili and Giacomo Leopardi

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Abstract In 1839, the 22-year-old Nik'oloz Baratašvili composed the long poem *Bedi Kartlisa* (The Fate of Georgia), in which he tackled one of the issues of modern Georgia: whether the choice made in 1783 by King Erekle II to draw up a treaty of friendship with the Russian Empire had been beneficial for Kartl-K'axeti. In the course of the poem Baratašvili maintains a stiff attitude, never siding for or against the choice of Erekle II. Much more instinctive and impetuous is the attitude of the 20-year-old Giacomo Leopardi, who, faced with 'Italy in chains', is overwhelmed by an individualistic romantic impulse. In his songs, he desires greatness for his homeland and the glory of ancient times when people ran to die for it, he states his aversion to foreign rule and his hopes for Italy's resurrection.

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Keywords Nik'oloz Baratašvili. Giacomo Leopardi. Georgian literature. Italian literature.

ცუდად ზომ მაინც არა ჩაივლის ეს განწირულის სულის
კვეთება,
და გზა უვალი, შენგან თელილი, მერანო ჩემო, მაინც
დარჩება;
რომ ჩემს შემდგომად მოძმესა ჩემსა სიძნელე გზისა
გაუადვილდეს,
და შეუპოვრად მას ჰუნე თვისი შავის ბედის წინ
გამოუქროლდეს!
(Baratašvili 1968, 121)

The yearnings of my restless soul will not in vain have glowed,
The impenetrable path you opened, my Pegasus, will remain.
He who follows in our wake, a smoother path will find;
Daring all, his fearless steed shall leave dark fate behind.¹

1 Cf. <http://allpoetry.com/Merani> (2017-04-04).

O glorioso spirito,
Dimmi: d'Italia tua morto è l'amore?
Di: quella fiamma che t'accese, è spenta?
(Rigoni 1987, 15)

Glorious spirit,
Tell me: Has your love for your Italy died?
Has the fire that gave you life gone cold?
(Galassi 2010, 25)

1 Introduction

Nik'oloz Baratašvili's (1817-45) poetry was reviewed by Boris Pasternak, who expressed his opinion in 1946, in a draft of the preface to his translation of the Georgian poet's lyrical works. In these poems, Pasternak finds the hallmarks of European Romanticism: "notes of pessimism, themes of loneliness, feelings of universal pain" (Pasternak 1991, 409). Similarly, Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), although unconnected and indeed opposed to Italian Romanticism, displays an undoubted

ideal affinity with some of the typical conceptions of European Romanticism, especially German. [...] Typically romantic is first of all his anti-rationalism: the defence of imagination, of illusion and of poetry against science. (Rigoni 2015a, 145)

The two poets were born and raised in very different historical and cultural contexts. Leopardi's philosophy and ideals draw inspiration from the vigorous wake of the materialists and sensists of the eighteenth century, enriched by the fundamental contribution of Greek thought and partly also by Old Testament precepts (Timpanaro 1965, 203). Baratašvili elaborates his conception of the world primarily on the teachings of the Old and New Testaments, on the pain and the disillusionment of Ecclesiastes, adopting the maxim: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (Qoh. 1: 2)² (Gac'erelia 1978, 136; Asatiani 1978, 76). However, he would never agree with Job's radical pessimism and despair expressed in the curse: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived" (Jb 3: 3). On the contrary, it is Leopardi who welcomes Job's curse, along with the maxims of the Greek classics, such as "Better for a man never to have been born or, once born, to die as soon as possible", or "The day

2 All Bible quotations are from *King James Bible. Authorized Version*, <http://www.King-jamesbibleonline.org> (2017-04-04).

of mourning should be the day of birth, not the day of death” etc. (Timpanaro 1965, 203), in the following verses:

Forse in qual forma, in quale
Stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna,
È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.
(Rigoni 1987, 88)

Maybe in whatever form or state,
Be it in stall or cradle,
The day we're born is cause for mourning.
(Galassi 2010, 202)

2 The Concept of Nature in Baratašvili and Leopardi

In the draft of his preface, Pasternak is struck by another important element in the poetry of Baratašvili, which somehow brings the latter closer to Leopardi: the conception of nature. The Russian poet is particularly impressed by two poems: *Šemoyameba Mtac'midazed* (1833-36; Twilight over Mtac'minda)³ and *Yame Q'abaxzed* (1836; Night over Q'abaxi)⁴, where we find that nature is not only described, but also presented as a living totality. For example, the poet addresses the mountain Mtac'minda with the following words: “Mtao cxovelo” (Living Mountain), in whose womb Baratašvili would find refuge (Baratašvili 1968, 88-9). In these poems, and especially in *Činari* (1844; Plane tree), the Georgian poet is able to grasp nature's secret voice and share it with us. He is convinced that nature and all incorporeal and inanimate beings have a voice, a secret language (which can be grasped only by poets), whose meaning is more alive than any other language, as he makes clear in the following verses in the poem *Činari*:

მრწამს, რომ არს ენა რამ საიდუმლო უასაკოთაც და უსულთ შორის,
და უცხოველეს სხვათა ენათა არს მნიშვნელობა მათის საუბრის!
(Baratašvili 1968, 130)

3 Mtac'minda is the mountain dominating the city of Tbilisi, where the Georgian Pantheon is located.

4 Q'abaxi was a large area where cavalry exercises took place. A green space used for walks and gatherings, after the annexation of Georgia to the Russian Empire in 1801, it was transformed into a park.

Incorporeal and inanimate beings have a secret language, I believe, and its meaning is more alive than any other utterance!⁵

Nature and all incorporeal and inanimate beings take on an anthropomorphic semblance (Nucubidze 1981, 6; 2006, 100; Lashkaradze 1987, 183). We do not know whether Baratašvili had some knowledge, maybe indirectly, about the early-nineteenth century German philosophy theories or about the work of Madame de Staël's, entitled *De l'Allemagne* (1810; On Germany), but the idea of a living nature was at that time widespread and shared within European Romanticism. Leopardi also believed that

The poet does not imitate nature: rather is it true that nature speaks within him and through his mouth, (Caesar, D'Intino 2013, 4372-3: 10 September 1828)

by means of feeling and imagination, so the task of the poet is to collect and express its voice.

When analysing Baratašvili's works and thinking, we cannot rely on the thousands of pages of notes, as it happens for Leopardi, written in the *Zibaldone di pensieri* (1817-32; Miscellany of thoughts).⁶ Unfortunately, his death in a foreign land has largely dispersed his work. Only thirty-seven poems, one long poem and eighteen letters survive.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, with his philosophical and cultural attitude, Nik'oloz Baratašvili promoted a radical turn in the poetry of his country, escaping the seduction of the Eastern literary tradition, for centuries the dominant force in the culture of Georgia, and placing himself firmly in the great stream of European literatures. In the literary history of his country, he is an extraordinary and original meteor, which had neither precursors nor followers (Č'avč'avadze 1953, 219).

3 Homeland in the Poetry of Baratašvili

In the draft of his preface, Pasternak makes a fleeting reference to another aspect of Baratašvili's work: his love for the homeland. In 1839, the 22-year-old poet composed the long poem *Bedi Kartlisa* (The Fate of Georgia), in which he tackled one of the issues of modern Georgia that were most hotly debated amongst the indigenous *intelligentsia*: whether the choice made in 1783 by King Erekle II to draw up a treaty of friend-

5 Unless otherwise indicated in the bibliography, translations are mine.

6 The word *Zibaldone* means «miscellany» or «hodgepodge».

ship, and establish a protectorate with the Russian Empire under the rule of Catherine II had been beneficial for Kartl-K'axeti.

According to several Georgian intellectuals, this treaty already contained in itself the premises for Kartl-K'axeti's subsequent annexation, accomplished in 1801 by the Russian Empire. The issue of the unexpected annexation by Russia trampled the demands and expectations of the Georgian ruling house, nobility and people. In the countryside a series of revolts broke out and an intense debate among Georgian intellectuals, which continued throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, arose. Some of them argued that King Erekle had opted for the lesser evil, since the 1801 annexation to the Russian Empire had preserved their national identity, as territorial entity and as Christian nation (Yayanidze 2012, 319; Lomidze 2014, 51-6). Other intellectuals asserted, on the contrary, that Russia, albeit a country sharing the same religion, was as dangerous an enemy as the Persians or the Ottoman Turks; thus, King Erekle would have done better not to draw up the treaty of friendship, which caused the subsequent annexation, trying instead to find political forms of agreement with the various enemies as the need arose.

The plot of the poem is historically placed in 1795, when the Georgian army suffered a crushing defeat at Krc'anisi by the hand of the Persian Army, led by Shah Agha Mohammad Khan. The poet compares the two positions illustrated above through a close dialogue between two characters: on the one hand, there is the old King Erekle II, who, witnessing his army defeated and unable to resist the Muslim enemies, supports the idea to put his Kingdom under the crown of the Russian Emperor, for the survival of Georgia. On the other hand, his counsellor Solomon Leonidze sets out the reasons that clash with this choice, in the name of Georgia's freedom and independence. King Erekle asserts that he is going to take this decision in the interest of Georgians, but his counsellor objects that the Georgian people are very different from the Russians and that, in any case, were Georgians to live under the Russian crown, they would be deprived of freedom, and, therefore, they would live unhappily.

The dialogue between the two characters is lengthy, well-articulated and, on occasion, even harsh, but in the course of the poem the young Baratašvili maintains a stiff, aloof attitude, never siding for or against the choice of Erekle II. However, with the passion infused in the words of the King's counsellor, in response to Erekle II's arguments, he expresses the following reproach:

მაგრამ შენ, მეფევე, ვინ მოგცა ნება -
სხვას განუბოძო შენთ ყმათ ცხოვრება,
მისდევდე შენსა გულისკვეთებას
და უთრგუნვიდე თავისუფლებას?
(Baratašvili 1968, vv. 324-7)

But who gave you, O Sire, the right
to donate the lives of your subjects,
to follow the desire of your heart,
riding roughshod over freedom?

A reproach that can also be heard in the subtle irony the counsellor Solomon uses when giving his wife a description about the conditions of golden captivity, in which the Georgian nobles should have lived in St. Petersburg, the new capital:

ხელმწიფეს ჰპოვებთ მამად კეთილად
და დედოფალსა დედისა ნაცვლად;
არ მოგაკლდებათ თავისუფლება,
განცხრომილება, ფუფუნეულება
მათთა სიმდიდრის პალატთა შორის!
(Baratašvili 1968, vv. 366-70)

Tsar will be a good father to you,
Tsarina a new mother,
in their rich palaces,
you will enjoy freedom,
luxury, pleasures!

We clearly perceive that the poet shares the opinions of the counsellor, although not explicitly:

His heart – said Pavle Ingoroq'va – is on the side of counsellor Solomon.
(Ingoroq'va 1963, 334)

In the stance taken by Baratašvili we could see a certain indifference, albeit painful, but perhaps it is more accurate to claim that we are witnessing a thoughtful resignation, a due obedience to a design that, in his deep religiousness, the poet feels is prepared by the divine mind, whose intentions are not given for us to know. There is no deviation in his love for Georgia, nor any sudden decisions, he instead pursues a line that interprets the negative events happening in his own country as inevitable phenomena, as trials to be accepted in the name of faith; in addition, he sometimes is able to illuminate the events mentioned by means of reason, which often leads the poet to an extreme vigilance, and therefore to inaction and idleness.

Nevertheless, in the poem *Saplavi mepis Irak'lisha* (1842; The Tomb of King Erekle), which, written three years after the long poem *The Fate of Georgia*, seems to represent its perfect epilogue, the poet is no longer uncertain, hesitant or even against the pro-Russian choice, but he supports and shares King Erekle's decision:

თაყვანს ვსცემ შენსა ნაანდერძებს, წინასწარად თქმულს!
გახსოვს, სიკვდილის ჟამს რომ უთხარ ქართლს დაობლებულს?
აჰა აღსრულდა ხელმწიფური აწ აზრი შენი,
და ვსჭამთ ნაყოფსა მისგან ტკბილსა აწ შენნი ძენი.
(Baratašvili 1968, 123)

I pay respect to your testament, prophetically spoken in advance.
Do you recall the time before your death you spoke to orphaned
Georgia?
Behold, your royal idea has come to pass
And we your sons are eating its sweet fruit.
(Rayfield 2010, 162)

There is no enthusiasm in his attitude, nor any expression of joy, he rather displays a simple acceptance of the event. However, it should be noted that this poem is dedicated to Mixeil Baratašvili (the same surname of the poet is coincidental), who was a descendant of one of those families that in 1724 had moved to Russia in the wake of King Vaxt'ang VI, so that his surname was Russified in Barataev. Mixeil was born in 1784 in Russia and was a historian and a numismatist; in 1826 he was arrested for an alleged involvement in the Decembrist revolt of 1825, but was later cleared of all charges. Perhaps the poet had this patriotic figure in mind when he wrote the line of the third stanza, in which he states that the exiled children of Georgia “უდნობს ყინულსა ჩრდილოეთსა, განცეცხლებული” (melt the Northern ice with the fire [of their souls]) (Baratašvili 1968, 123). Probably the poet meant that Georgian refugees would spread their rebellious and libertarian spirit also within the despotic Russian Empire; furthermore, in the same third stanza he says that, returning to his homeland, the exiled children of Georgia would bring to their country education (*ganatleba*), thus foreshadowing, or rather hoping for – as might be understood – a cultural, but not a political union between Georgia and Russia. Because of the character of openness that is connected with the very meaning of the word ‘education’, we can assume that with this term Baratašvili wants to represent a cultural union of his country that is not limited to Russia alone. A cultural union perhaps open to the great European culture, but it seems impossible to find valid elements in support of this thesis. However, if we accept the interpretation that the poet would welcome a cultural (but not a political) union between Georgia and Russia, the third stanza of the poem would openly contradict the choice made by King Erekle to conclude a treaty of protectorate and, so, to entrust a despotic Russia with the protection of his country, which Baratašvili defends throughout the poem. In any case, in *The Tomb of King Erekle* the poet’s approval of King Erekle’s pro-Russian choice seems indisputable, except precisely in the third stanza, which is quite contradictory and partly obscure.

In order to explain this stanza, we must note that Baratašvili wrote the poem *Sumbuli da mc'iri* (The Hyacinth and the Pilgrim) in that same 1842. The hyacinth had been pulled out of the earth, where it had sprung up and, although it had been placed in a luxurious palace, where it was lovingly cared for, it no longer had the fragrance it once had. Here the poet uses again the theme of the golden prison that had already been used, as we have seen above, in the long poem *The Fate of Georgia*. In the flower, we might see a metaphor of Georgia, which, although no longer threatened by Muslim enemies, feels oppressed, if not stifled, under the domination of the Russian Empire, and soon fades. In other words, both the poem *The Tomb of King Erekle* and the poem *The Hyacinth and the Pilgrim* could be considered as two possible epilogues of the long poem *The Fate of Georgia*, offering, however, opposite conclusions.

Nevertheless, we must add a third conceivable epilogue, less rational and much more romantic, the conclusion of the individual heroic act in the name of the freedom of the homeland, proposed by Baratašvili in the poem conventionally called *Merani* (1842; Pegasus):

გასწი, გაფრინდი, ჩემო მერანო, გარდამატარე ბედის სამძღვარი,
თუ აქამომდე არ ემონა მას, არც აწ ემონოს შენი მხედარი!
(Baratašvili 1968, 121)

Bear me far beyond the bounds of fate, my Pegasus,
Fate whose slave I never was and henceforth - never shall be!⁷

In this poem, the theme of sacrifice and individual immolation for the homeland is strengthened by the nostalgia of the impossible or, better still, the desire for the infinite, which can only be fulfilled by breaking the limits set for each one of us by our own destiny. This desire, since Goethe's *Faust*, will mark the philosophy of Romanticism and, consequently, the behaviour of many romantic heroes (Gac'erelia 1978, 159-60).

4 Homeland in the Poetry of Leopardi

Much more instinctive and impetuous is the attitude of the twenty-year-old Giacomo Leopardi, who, faced with 'Italy in chains',

E questo è peggio,
Che di catene ha carche ambe le braccia.
(Rigoni 1987, 5)

7 Cf. <http://allpoetry.com/Merani> (2017-04-04).

And, worse, her arms
are bound with chains.
(Galassi 2010, 3)

i.e. divided into many small states and fallen into the hands of foreign armies and foreign ruling dynasties, is overwhelmed by a romantic impulse of individualism. In the canto or song *All'Italia* (To Italy), written in 1818, he cries:

L'armi, qua l'armi: io solo
Combatterò, procomberò sol io.
Dammi, o ciel, che sia foco
Agl'italici petti il sangue mio.
(Rigoni 1987, 6)

To arms! Bring me my sword;
I'll fight alone, I'll fall alone.
Let my blood, O heaven,
Be inspiring to Italian hearts.
(Galassi 2010, 5)

In two other songs of those years, *Sopra il monumento di Dante che si preparava in Firenze* (1818; On the monument to Dante Being Erected in Florence) and *Ad Angelo Mai, quand'ebbe trovato i libri di Cicerone della Repubblica* (1820; To Angelo Mai. On His Finding the Manuscript of Cicero's *De re publica*), Leopardi

desires greatness for his homeland and the glory of ancient times when people ran to die for it, (Salvatorelli 1975, 180)

and he states his aversion to foreign rule and his hopes for Italy's resurrection. This was true even when his disenchantment worsened, leading the way to his concept of the vanity of human things, starting from political greatness:

E se ne porta il tempo
Ogni umano accidente. Or dov'è il suono
Di que' popoli antichi? Or dov'è il grido
De' nostri avi famosi, e il grande impero
Di quella Roma, e l'armi, e il fragorio
Che n'andò per la terra e l'oceano?
(Rigoni 1987, 51)

And time makes off with every human thing.
Where is the clamour of those ancient peoples?

Where is the renown
Of our famed ancestors, and the great empire
Of their Rome, her armies,
And the din she made on land and sea?
(Galassi 2010, 111)

The love for his own country will always be present within him, becoming more acute and, at the same time, more bitter and exasperated (Rigoni 2015b, 235). This love will never become a rhetorical *tòpos* (Brioschi 1980, 75), it will rather be one of those strong passions and beneficial illusions that, in his opinion, mitigate human unhappiness (Salvatorelli 1975, 180). Leopardi will be a very severe, rigid and intransigent critic of his Italian contemporaries, as we can see in his unfinished work *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'italiani* (1824; Discourse on the Present State of Morality of the Italians). To the eyes of the poet, national spirit takes on a decisive role: without it, he writes in the *Zibaldone* on 24 March 1821,

there has never been any greatness in this world, and not merely national greatness, but individual greatness also. (Caesar, D'Intino 2013, 865)

The poet traces the decadence of Italy, known since at least the seventeenth century, back to the lack of the concepts of 'nation' and 'national spirit' (nation and homeland are two terms almost synonymous in Leopardi), a lack that pervades every aspect of Italy's life: political, military, social, moral and cultural. On 10-11 November 1823, the poet writes in the *Zibaldone*:

This political condition of Italy and Spain has produced and produces the usual and inevitable effects. Death and privation of literature, industry, society, art, talent, culture, great minds, inventive faculty, originality, great passions, which are intense, useful or beautiful and splendid, of every social advantage, of great deeds and therefore of great writings, inaction, lethargy both in private life and with respect to the private, as well as with respect to the public, and like the public insignificant with respect to other nations. These effects came into being at once, and from the 17th century onward they have continued to increase both in Italy and in Spain, and today they are at their peak in both countries, although the reasons given for them are perhaps no greater now than in the beginning. [...] This came about because nothing in nature happens by leaps, and because a living being when struck down by death, cools little by little, and is a good deal warmer a few moments after death than some time afterward. In the 17th century, and also in the 18th, Italy, though already killed, still twitched and gave off fumes. The same can be argued about Spain. Now one and the other are motionless and ice-cold, and in the complete power of death. (Caesar, D'Intino 2013, 3860)

At the beginning of his *Discourse*, the poet wonders how modern civil societies can survive in the absence of all their foundations. In terms of this serious problem, Italy is a special case, as it is a country where the vanity and vacuity of life do not disguise themselves, and can be seen for what they are, as the filter, or shield, provided by 'society', is missing. As matter of fact:

the other civilized nations, i.e. mainly France, England and Germany, have a conservative principle of morality, and therefore of society: though minimal and almost vile compared to the great moral and illusory principles that have been lost, this has nevertheless an important effect. (Damiani 1988, 448)

It is wrongly believed that disenchanting France is the most cynical country: the primacy of cynicism belongs to Italy, where this attitude is widespread in all social classes:

The upper classes of Italy are the most cynical of all their peers in other countries. The Italian populace is the most cynical of populaces. (Damiani 1988, 462)

This attitude produces indifference, contempt and derision of everybody against each other, in a kind of war of all against all. (Rigoni 2015c, 217)

If Italy lacks public opinion, society, public spirit, self-respect and a sense of honour there is only one answer: Italy is not a nation. In such situation of social anarchy, Italians cannot be citizens, only individuals, and each one of them makes "their own tone and their own manner" (Damiani 1988, 454) says the poet in his *Discourse*, taking up an observation already made in the *Zibaldone*:

There is no social tone in this nation [Italy]: everyone has their own. Indeed, there is no tone of society that can be said to be Italian. (Caesar, D'Intino 2013, 3546: 28 September 1823)

Thus, less than ever will Italians experience the strong, national pride that leads the French and the British to look down on all other peoples and that, although born from excessive self-esteem, is a great resource for the unity, strength and morality of a nation. We read in the *Zibaldone* on 25 March 1827:

But another source of pride and of disregard for others, which is unknown to us but has become natural and typical of the French and English because it is instilled from infancy, is admiration for one's own

country. Whatever happens, it is never possible for the most benevolent, well-educated, and open-minded Frenchman or Englishman, when he finds himself in the company of foreigners, not to think wholeheartedly and sincerely that he is with an inferior (whatever the other circumstances might be), not to scorn other nations in general to a greater or lesser extent, and not to make some kind of outward demonstration of his feeling of superiority. This is a trigger, a very distinctive source of pride and self-esteem, to the prejudice or belittlement of others, about which no other civilized populations, except for people from the said nations, can have or form a proper idea. (Caesar, D'Intino 2013, 4261)

Equally critical towards Italians is Leopardi's work *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*⁸ (1831-37; The War Between Mice and Crabs), completed two or three days before his death. From this relentless satire, Italy comes out as subjected to the yoke of a foreign power (the crabs), supported by a clerical faction (the frogs), which is opposed by the progressive liberals (the mice). As a matter of fact, he would also radically demolish the ideology of the 'liberal mice', not to mention his views on the 'Carbonari' conspirators; nevertheless, Leopardi's love for his own country would not be affected in the slightest by this criticism (Bruni 2015, 123-9). Giacomo Leopardi, the man who had broken all illusions, always held onto at least another illusion beside poetry: the illusion of a homeland, the illusion of Italy (Rigoni 2015b, 238).

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8 The word *Paralipomeni* means 'things that are omitted', i.e. 'Appendix'. They are a sort of continuation of the pseudo-Homeric long poem *Batracomiomachia*, translated into Italian three times by Leopardi, with the title *The War of Mice and Frogs*.

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