

Southern Caucasus Poetry

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ANTIQUITY

Comparisons. Prior to the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the 5th century, Armenians wrote in Greek, Latin, Middle Persian, and Pahlavi. Although it was arguably the first dominant language of written literary expression in the Caucasus, Greek existed alongside a flourishing oral tradition. Minstrel poets known as *gusans* kept the poetic tradition alive by traveling through Armenian lands, singing songs in many different genres. They performed at funerals, weddings, harvest festivals, and religious holidays. Meanwhile, in Georgia oral poetry flourished, particularly in the mountainous regions of Pshav-Khevsureti, Megrelian, Svan, and Racha. In Azerbaijan, a similar pattern can be observed; the figure of the *ashiq* is the Turkic counterpart to the Armenian *gusan*.

Georgian.

Pre-Christian poetry Pre-Christian Georgian poetry is informed by a pagan pantheon which includes a supreme deity (*morige ghmerti*) and a number of subordinate gods. Many of these subordinate deities have been merged with Christian saints, such as St. George (Giorgi), often depicted as a knight on horseback and a slayer of dragons, St. Barbara, who is (re)configured as a goddess of fertility and a healer of illnesses, St. Mary, a protector of women, and Jesus Christ, who presides over the world of the dead. All of these figures feature in Georgian folk poetry.

Pagan deities: Dali Coexisting with these reconfigured Christian saints are traditional heroes of the pre-Christian pagan pantheon, including the Svanetian hunter goddess Dali. Dali is most frequently encountered in folk poetry as a seducer of hunters, whom she destroys due to jealousy. It was believed that a hunter's luck depended on whether or not Dali wished him to succeed. Some scholars have interpreted the predominance of Dali within the Georgian folk pantheon as evidence of the matriarchal origins of pre-Christian Georgian culture. Yet another type of creature who features in Georgian folk poetry are the *kajis*, a race of demons with magical powers. *Kajis* are often depicted as enemies of St. George, who battles and defeats them in order to protect humanity from their malign influence.

Historical figures In addition to pagan deities and Christian saints reconfigured as pagan deities, historical figures from Georgia's past are also incorporated into the pantheon of Georgian folk poetry. The best known such figures are Queen Tamar (r. 1184-1213), who presided over Georgia's so-called Golden Age, and her son Giorgi IV (1191–1223), who is known in Georgian folk poetry as Lasha Giorgi.

folk poetry Although early Georgian folk poetry lacks full rhyme, it abounds in slant rhyme, in which words that have similar, but not identical, sounds are repeated according to a pattern. It is distinct from much written poetry in Georgian in that it is composed to be performed with music, often an instrumental accompaniment, and sometimes as part of a dance. The epic ballads of the Khevsurs and Pshavs of northern Georgia were performed with a traditional Georgian three-string plucked instrument called the *pandori*. Another aspect of Georgian folk poetry that is a function of its oral status and which connects it to the *ashuq/gusan* tradition found throughout the Caucasus is improvisation. The fixed form of ballads and other poems was mediated by the performance context, in which new improvised compositions were

composed by individuals engaged in poetry competitions called *shairoba*, after the Arabo-Persian word for verse, *shir*.

Majama One device used by both Georgian oral folk poetry and written Georgian poetry is *majama*, whereby homophonous words or phrases occur in the rhyming portion of the line like a refrain. This device would later be described by the early modern poet Teimuraz I as “that which is conjoined / selected orthographies brought together as one.” A simpler rendering of the term would be “pun,” in which the same sound is used in different ways to signify different things. Often, in the folkloric tradition in particular, it was not so much specific words that were repeated as sounds and sound clusters.

Written Poetry The exact beginnings of written poetry have not been established for any literature of the Caucasus. The inscriptions on the walls of the Ateni Sioni Church near the city of Gori in eastern Georgia at the confluence of the Mtkvari and the Liakhvi River are the oldest known examples of rhymed verse in Georgian. They have been dated to the second half of the 9th century. Early Georgian religious poetry is influenced by Byzantine hymnography, among other sources. It was only towards the end of the 11th century that rhymed poetry became commonplace in Georgian literature. Although rhyme became a ubiquitous feature of subsequent Georgian folk poetry, the folk poetry of Svan continues to lack rhyme.

Armenian. Like written Georgian poetry, the beginnings of written Armenian literary culture were closely linked to the role of the Church, which was the primary force behind the spread of literacy in this region. Scholars accept that pagan oral literature in Armenia predates the invention of the Armenian alphabet, but early Christian priests did their best to erase any traces of such a tradition.

Hayk and Bel The trajectory of ancient Armenian poetry mirrors that of Georgian in many respects, not least in terms of its mountainous provenance. In the Armenian highlands, the earliest poetry evolved around an epic narrative in verse called *Hayk and Bel*. This narrative has been traced back to historical events relating to the Kingdom of Urartu (9th–6th centuries BCE). Just as the protagonists of ancient Georgian folk poetry were also deities, so too was Hayk descended from the first gods according to Armenian mythology. These gods spawned a race of giants, who arrogantly set about constructing a tall tower (reminiscent of the Tower of Babel). Suddenly, a wind sent by the gods who were angry at the arrogance of these giants scattered the building into pieces. Languages multiplied and the giants lost the ability to understand each other.

Hayk the hero Hayk was among this group. He was famous as being the bravest and strongest, as the one most respectful of others’ freedoms. His name is highly symbolic, since Hay is what Armenians call themselves. The country of Armenian is called Hayastan in the Armenian language. Hayk opposed the tyranny of Bel. When Hayk’s son Aramanyak was born, he assembled a group of three hundred people, mostly from his own family and servants, and travelled to Mt. Ararat. Hayk built a residence at the foot of the mountain, which he gave to his grandson Cadmos. Hayk also built a village that he called after himself, Haykashen, and settled there. When Hayk refused to acknowledge Bel’s sovereignty, Bel sent his infantry to the land of Ararat in order to attack Cadmos and his family and pressure them into submission. Cadmos fled before Bel reached Ararat and warned Hayk of Bel’s approaching army. Hayk assembled his sons and grandsons together and instructed them in the art of war. Miraculously, they prevailed over Bel’s army.

Hayots Dzor The battle ended when Hayk shot Bel with an arrow and killed him. It is believed that the village of Hayots Dzor (“valley of the Armenians”) is named in honor of this event, for Hayk is said to have built a villa here, on the site of the battle. Hayots Dzor is currently part of the modern state of Turkey and is called Gürpınar. As a foundational figure in the creation of the Armenian people, Hayk is worshipped as a god in the area around Lake Van. Intriguingly, the constellation of Orion, which is named after a hunter in Greek mythology, is called Hayk in the fifth-century Armenian translation of the Bible. Hayk is also identified with the Urartian god Khaldi.

King Aram Related to the story of Hayk and Bal is the story of King Aram. Although mythical, this narrative document historical events and processes, such as the eastward expansion of the Armenian

kingdom to the borders of the Medes, Assyria, and Cappadocia. Aram's story is also tied up with the fate of the Armenian language, since he ordered everyone in the lands over which he ruled to learn Armenian.

Artashes and Satenik A second cycle of epic poetry is based on historical events that transpired from the 6th century BCE under the Yervanduni dynasty to year 11 of the Common Era under the Artashesian dynasty. This cycle involves a number of protagonists who were involved in the conflict between Tigran and Azhdahak, the king of Media during the 6th century BCE. Among the featured characters are Artashes, king of Armenia, and Satenik, an Alan princess. The Alans were a nomadic people who lived in the steppe region of the northwestern Black Sea. They aligned with the mountaineers of the northern Caucasus as well as with half of the Georgian population and plundered the Armenian people.

Artashes In this second epic cycle, the Armenian king Artashes waged war on the Alans and captured the king's son. The king of the Alans was stricken by grief and offered peace with the Armenians and to stop all raids onto their territory, if his son would be returned. Artashes refused. The king's daughter Satenik then approached Artashes and requested that her brother be released from captivity. Artashes was overwhelmed by Satenik's beauty and decided to try to marry her. In exchange for her hand in marriage, he offered a peace treaty with the Alans and promised to free her brother from captivity. Her father agreed. Satenik became Artashes' first wife and bore him many sons, including Artavazd. Unfortunately, their marriage ended tragically. Satenik fell in love with one of Artashes' rivals named Argavan, who was himself a descendent of the dragon Azhdahak.

Tork Angegh Non-human characters, such as the giant Tork Angegh, are also included in the second cycle, as is the tale of Sanatruk and Yervand, which tells of how an infant prince becomes king after he is saved by a nurse. The tale of Anushavan and Sosanever reveals much about pagan practices among pre-Christian Armenians. In this story, the rustling of leaves and the direction in which the leaves move when blown by the breeze is a form of divination.

Armenian lyric tradition Alongside oral epics, an ancient Armenian lyric tradition is extant only in fragments. Armenian epic poetry also includes many lyrical passages that celebrate the birth and marriage, and lament the death, of their protagonists. The tale of Artashes and Artavazd has for example preserved verbatim quotations from the songs sung by Armenian minstrels. In these poems-within-poems, nature plays an overwhelming role. During the birth of the god Vahagn for example we are told that "smoke curled out of the reed / a flame leaped out of the reed / and out of the flame, a fair child came forth." Alliteration, rhyme, and repetition are common featured of ancient Armenian lyric poetry.

Grigor Narekatsi, The Book of Lamentations Poetry was not a dominant genre of classical (written) Armenian until the 10th century, with the poetry of St. Grigor Narekatsi (also known as Gregory of Narek, 951-1003). This poet, monk, and theologian passed his life on the southern shores of Lake Van. His best-known work, *The Book of Lamentations* (Լաւրեւազի), also known as *Narek*, consists of ten thousand lines divided into ninety-five chapters, all of which are addressed to God. It is a work of mystical poetry that has been described as a monologue, a personal lyric, and a confessional poem. The centrality of the *Book of Lamentations* to Armenian culture is reflected in the fact that it is a staple of many Armenian households, and is regarded as being the second most popular work of Armenian culture, after the Bible. Physical copies of the book are regarded as having miraculous properties, including the ability to cure diseases. Like the Georgian poet Rustaveli a few centuries later, Narekatsi inspired countless poets within his own tradition, including his most direct literary successor, Grigor Magistros (discussed below).

Azerbaijan

Although there is no extant Turkic-language poetry from the ancient period, the region of Azerbaijan coincided with the territory of Caucasian Albania, which had a written literature and likely a vibrant oral tradition as well, practically none of which is extant. Poetry in Udi, the language of Caucasian Albania has not reached us.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What are the earliest extant examples of poetry in ancient Georgian and Armenian?
- 2) What were the most popular genres of poetry in ancient Georgian and Armenian?
- 3) How did religion interact with culture in fostering the development of written poetry in Georgian and Armenian?
- 4) What was the written tradition of the region of modern Azerbaijan in antiquity?

POST-CLASSICAL/MEDIEVAL

Georgian.

growth in Georgian literature The weakening of the Byzantine empire during the 10th provided an opportunity for smaller literatures like Georgian and Armenian to flourish. King David IV, known as the Builder (r. 1089–1125), and his great-granddaughter Queen Tamar (r. 1184-1213) two centuries later, presided over a period of remarkable growth in Georgian literature, particularly in the domain of poetry. Persian had by this time become the dominant influence on all literatures of the Caucasus, including Georgian and Armenian. If one specific work of Persian literature among the many that influenced the development of Georgian and Armenian poetry had to be named, it would be Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings* (*Shahnama*), a work composed in the first quarter of the 11th century that was to become a source for narrative poetry across the Persianate world.

Rustaveli's Knight in the Panther's Skin Among the works that bear the clearest imprint of Ferdowsi's epic is Shota Rustaveli's *Knight in the Panther's Skin* (*Vepkhvistqaosani*), composed circa 1220 in southeastern Georgia. Rustaveli's epic is remarkable on many levels, from its complex plot, which guides the characters across India and beyond, to its distinctive language and prosody, which introduced a new meter, the *shairi* (from the Perso-Arabic *shi'r*, meaning poetry), into Georgian poetry. Although *Knight in the Panther's Skin* was written to be read, it also shares features in common with Georgian folk poetry, including the use of slant rhyme, a fact that enables us to think of oral and written Georgian literature as comprising a single tradition.

Rustaveli's predecessors Every Georgian poet who came after Rustaveli inevitably wrote in his shadow, and many poets explicitly named him as their progenitor. *Knight in the Panther's Skin* has also impacted Georgian culture beyond the Georgian language, and has been translated into non-Georgian languages of Georgia, such as Svan, Laz, and Mingrelian, as well as into countless other languages of the world. *Knight in the Panther's Skin* was not created in a vacuum. Among the works Rustaveli mentions as predecessors are the prose translation of Fakhr al-Din Gurgani's Persian *Vis and Ramin* by Sergis Tmogveli, known as *Visramiani*, and the romance *Amiran-Darejaniani* by Moses Khoneli. Notably, both of these works are in prose, even though the first is based on a Persian verse romance.

Persian in Azerbaijan. Although Azeri was not regularly used for written literary expression until the 14th century, the region of Azerbaijan, which was then part of the wider Persian world, was the birthplace of many of the most important poets of the entire Persian tradition, including Nizami of Ganja (1141-1209) in northwestern Azerbaijan and Khaqani of Shirvan (1120-1199).

Khaqani Shirvani Khaqani's literary milieu of Shirvan, not far from the border with Daghestan, also included a number of lesser known poets including Falaki of Shirvan, Mujir al-Din Baylaqani, and Qatran Tabrizi. Nizami's father-in-law Abu'l 'Ala Ganjevi was also a poet of note, although the majority of his poetry is no longer extant. Although he left Shirvan for a pilgrimage that took him across Iraq and passed the final years of his life in Tabriz, where he died, Khaqani had deep roots in the Caucasus and often referred to it, mostly in negative terms, in his verse. His mother was a Christian convert to Islam—in the *Two Gifts from Iraq (Tuhfat al-'Iraqayn)*, his autobiography in verse, he suggested that she was kidnapped, enslaved, and forcibly converted—and scholars have detected puns in his poems based on the Georgian language. Khaqani's Christian Qasida is a landmark work that reflected in poetic terms on the intertwining of Islam and Christianity, while also using Christian theology as a means of criticizing the Muslim sultan. Khaqani wrote frequently about imprisonment in his poems, and is known for bringing the genre of Persian prison poetry (*habsiyyat*) to new level of poetic exigency.

Nizami Ganjevi Unlike Khaqani, Nizami never left the place of his birth (or at least he never wrote about any travelling he may have done). Yet the romances he composed, all of which were written from his home in Ganja, circulated across the Persianate world and inspired countless imitations in Turkic literatures (Azeri, Ottoman, Chaghatay, and others), Kurdish, Georgian, Pashto, Urdu, Judeo-Persian, and in many other languages of West Asia. Nizami married a Kipchak slave girl sent to him by Fakhr al-Din Bahramshah, the ruler of Darband, who died soon after he completed the love story *Khusrow and Shirin*.

Nizami's romances Nizami's romances belong to a type of Persian verse called the *masnavi* (derived from the Arabic word for "two"), which consists of rhyming couplets. Although the term *masnavi* refers to prosody of a poem, *masnavi* denotes more than a poetic form; poems that conform to this structure tend to be lengthy narratives that follow a certain pattern in terms of their themes topics as well. More often than not, they deal with love in one way or another, although some *masnavis* (such as Nizami's own *Treasury of Mysteries (Makhzan al-Asrar, c. 1163)* are spiritual or didactic in their orientation. Nizami is the unrivaled master of the *masnavi* form not just for poets from the Caucasus, but for Persian literature as a whole. It could even be argued that his *hamsa*—literally, his quintet—made Persian literature into a world literature that could traverse continents, religions, and empires.

Khusraw and Shirin Nizami's *masnavis* were influential everywhere in the Persianate world, but for the Caucasus in particular it would be difficult to overstate their importance. His story of *Khusraw and Shirin* (c. 1177) draws on earlier legends concerning the Sasanian king Khusrow Parviz (r. 591-628) and his beloved Shirin. In Nizami's version, Shirin is depicted as Armenian, although Shirin is described in early historiographic sources as Aramean, meaning that she was from Aram in modern Syria and of Semitic background. In both the historical account of chronicles and the fictional account of Nizami, Shirin is a Christian woman in a world in which the ruling class was Zoroastrian. In addition to *Treasury of Mysteries* and *Khusraw and Shirin*, Nizami's quintet comprises *Layli and Majnun* (1192), which is a Persian remake of the Arabic tale of the 7th century poet Qays ibn al-Mulawwah, *The Book of Alexander* (1194), on the conquests of the Alexander the Great, founder of the Greek kingdom of Macedon, and *The Seven Beauties* (1197), which renders the life and exploits of the Sassanian king Bahram V in fictional form.

Mijnuroba, love madness In terms of its subject matter as well as its form, Rustaveli's *Knight in the Panther's Skin* is a Georgian counterpart to the *masnavis* of Nizami. The conceptualization of love as well as the plot structure are clearly borrowed from earlier Persian romances, including those of Nizami. Even the very word for Rustaveli's meter, *shairi*, reflects the influence of Persian, since it is a Georgian adaptation of the Persian and Arabic word for poetry. Similarly, the dominant theme of Rustaveli's story, *mijnuroba* (love madness) is inspired by Nizami's *Layli and Majnun*, in which the male protagonist is assigned a name that reflects his spiritual condition: driven mad by love (*majnun*). *Mijnuroba* is a Georgianized version of the Perso-Arabic word for someone who is driven to madness by his or her love (the *-oba* ending being a Georgian suffix). The word *mijnuroba* entered Georgian culture through Rustaveli's work, and is part of everyday Georgian language to this day. Georgian was one of the earliest literatures to vernacularize the Persian tradition, a process best known through Turkic and later Urdu translations of Persian narratives.

Armenian. While Armenian poetry was as heavily influenced by the Persian tradition as was Georgian, this influence was manifested in different ways, that did not extend to recreating the *masnavi* form in that language, as Rustaveli did for Georgian.

Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni (c. 990–1058) is, after Narekatsi, among the greatest classical Armenian poets. His major work is a long narrative poem called *Magnalia Dei* that is addressed to the Muslim, Abu Nasr al-Manazi. The poem summarizes the principal events recorded in the Bible. Grigor's aim was to show that the Bible could rival the Quran, and also adopt a versified form. (Although according to a strict interpretation the Quran is composed in rhymed prose called *saj'* rather than in verse.) It is believed that al-Manazi converted to Christianity soon after reading it. *Magnalia Dei* is important in literary terms for its use of Arabic rhyme (*qafiya*), a practice that initiated a new genre in Armenian literature and which parallels the uses Rustaveli made of Persian prosody in Georgian, albeit with more extensive polemical and theological implications. Grigor was also a translator of many important works of ancient Greek learning, including Plato's *Timaeus* and *Phaedo* and Euclid's *Geometry*.

Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia Soon after Grigor Magistros, Armenian literature split off into two branches: Western and Eastern. The emergence of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (1080–1198) initiated this split, as the center of Armenian literary culture shifted southwards, to the region of Cilicia in southeast Asia Minor (modern day Adana, Turkey). The fact that Armenian writers of both branches wrote increasingly in their spoken dialects and gradually shifted away from the classical language further consolidated this split.

Hovhannes and Asha Armenian narrative poems, such as Hovhannes Tlgouratzi's (1360-1440) *Hovhannes and Asha*, depicting the love that develops between a Muslim woman and a Christian man, chronicle a world in which close proximity between Muslims and Christians was a feature of everyday life. (Called the poet of love "that is flesh and blood," Tlgouratzi is also the author of two epic poems, one dedicated to Armenian Cilician prince Libarid and another to Gregory of Narek, also known as Grigor Narekasti.) The Christian Qasida of Khaqani Shirvani similarly reveals the entanglement of Muslim and Christian religious traditions throughout the Caucasus.

Frik Alongside Hovhannes Tlgouratzi, other major Armenian poets from this period include Frik (1230-1310), Gostantin Yertzngatzi (1250-1310), and Krikoris of Akhtamar (1484-1544). Frik in particular is noted for his lyric voice, which makes ample use of vernacular speech. Frik was also bold in the object of his critiques, which extended to social inequality and injustice. Unlike most Armenian writers of his era, Frik was a layman without any formal affiliation with or position in the church. Frik's propensity for critique extends to God himself, whom he asks to justify human. Only twenty-seven of Gostantin Yertzngatzi's poems survive, and it is likely that a great many of his poems have been lost. His poems are filled with tropes from Persian poetry, including the nightingale and the rose. Krikoris was an archbishop in the Armenian church, and he used his allegorical imagination to celebrate nature and praise love, while providing ethical instruction to his readers. He was also a scribe and painter of miniatures. His poetry is marked by a strong sense of subjectivity as well as a simple style. He led a difficult life, and was constantly escaping political upheaval and invasions.

Cross-Cultural Connections. In both Armenian and Georgian, literary production declined towards the end of the fourteenth century, due largely to the Mamluk and Timurid invasions of 1375 and 1387. This period and subsequent centuries also witnessed the beginnings of a classical Azeri literature, that was for the first time beginning to acquire written form.

Azeri literature

Arguably, the growth of Azeri literature during this century was due in part to the same invasions that account for the decline of Armenian and Georgian. Azeri literature as such did not begin during this period, but the 13th century does mark its written beginnings, although Turkic literature from Central Asia and Kashgar had existed in writing for centuries by this point. The earliest written poems in Azeri are ascribed to Izzeddin Hasanoğlu (d. 1260), who was born in Khorasan. He took the nom-de-plume

(*takhallus*) Pur-i Hasan, meaning “son of Hasan.” Pur-i Hasan wrote in Persian as well as Azeri and his poems circulated across the Islamic world, including in Egypt.

Izzeddin Hasanoğlu Hasanoğlu was followed by poets such as Qazi Ahmad Boran al-Din of eastern Anatolia and Imad al-Din Nasimi (1369–1417), who was born in Shemakhi but died in Syria. Nasimi was the most famous Azeri follower of the school of antinomian mysticism known as Hurufism (the name refers to the Perso-Arabic term for letters, “*huruf*”). Hurufis engaged in numerological interpretations of the letters of the Perso-Arabic alphabet and incorporated these readings into their poems. Nasimi believed in the primacy of the divine word as a basis of creation, the deification of humanity, and the eventual manifestation of paradise on earth. He was executed for his beliefs in Aleppo. Among his disciples were Refîî, who wrote two exegeses of Hurufism: *Beşâretnâme* and *Gencnâme*. Many Azeri works relating to Hurufism were translations of Azeri originals. These include Abdülmecid Firişteoğlu’s Divine Book of Love (*Işknâme-i llâhî*), which is an Azeri translation of the *Book of Eternity (Javdannama)* of Fazl-Allah Astarabadi, the founder of Hurufism.

Persian and Arabic Overall, post-classical poetry throughout the Caucasus operated under the shadow, first and foremost of Persian poetry, and, more indirectly, of Arabic literary norms and genres. Poetry was produced in Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri often independently of neighboring literatures, yet each of these literatures was responding to the same global trends.

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the significance of Khaqani within medieval poetry in the Caucasus?
- 2) What impact did the church exert on the development of medieval Georgian and Armenian poetry?
- 3) What evidence is there of connections, overlaps, and/or parallels among the Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri poetic traditions?
- 4) How did medieval Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani poets negotiate the relationship between oral and written traditions?

EARLY MODERN

Persian. As during the post-classical period, Persian was the dominant literary and cultural influence on literature in the Caucasus throughout the early modern period. While this was the era of Safavid power, when Iran exerted more control over the Caucasus than did Russia, Persian influence extended well beyond Iran; it also provided the channel through which the works of Central Asian poets such as Jami and Chaghatay Turkic poets such as Nava’i reached the Caucasus.

Georgian. The most prominent early modern Georgian poet is without question Teimuraz I (1589-1661), who was also king of Kakheti and Kartli in eastern Georgia. Teimuraz’s mother Ketevan was martyred in Shiraz in 1624 on the order of Shah Abbas for refusing to convert to Christianity. Teimuraz

wrote a poem narrating her branding and execution, entitled *The Book of the Martyrdom of Queen Ketevan* (წიგნი და წამება ქეთევან დედოფლისა/ *ts'igni da ts'ameba ketevan dedoplisa*), seven months after his mother's death. Unbeknown to Teimuraz, the German Baroque poet Gryphius would later dedicate one of his most famous mourning plays (*Trauerspiel*), *Katharina von Georgien* (1657), to his mother's tragic death.

Teimuraz I's masnavis In addition to the narrative poem of his mother's martyrdom, Teimuraz I composed four more long poems modeled after the Persian *masnavi* form that was most closely associated with Nizami Ganjevi: *Layla and Majnun* (ლეილმაჯნუნიაანი/ *leilmajnuniani*), *Yusuf and Zulaikha* (იოსებზილიხანიაანი/ *iosebzilikhaniani*), *The Rose and the Nightingale* (ვარდბულბულიანი/ *vardbulbuliani*), and *The Candle and the Moth* (შამიფარვანიაანი/ *shamiparvaniani*). The first two works are so clearly modelled on the *masnavis* of Nizami and the Timurid Persian poet Jami (d. 1492), that they could be considered translations, in the broad sense of the term. The second of these two works are Teimuraz's own creations, yet they also draw heavily on Persian tropes and imagery.

Archil of Imereti To cite just one example of the influence of Chaghatay literature on Georgian literary culture: Archil of Imereti's (1647-1713) *Bahramguri*, also known by the title *Seven Planets* (შვიდი მთიები/ *Shvidi mtiebi*), is a Georgian retelling of a Persian story that had earlier been told by Nizami Ganjevi, Amir Khusrow of India, and Nava'i of Turkic Central Asia. According to Archil's editor, it was the latter version, and not the versions of his Persian predecessors, that exerted the greatest influence on the structure and plot of Archil's version.

Mamuka Avtandili Baratashvili Although Georgian poetry dates back to antiquity, theorization about Georgian poetry and poetics is a relatively modern phenomenon. The first extended reflection on Georgian poetics was composed by Mamuka Avtandili Baratashvili, who followed his king and patron Vakhtang VI (r. 1716-1724) into exile in Russia after the Ottoman invasion of Safavid Persia. Baratashvili's treatise, entitled *Book of the Study of Poetry* (*Chashniki anu leksis stsvilis tsigni*), was composed in 1731 while he was residing in Moscow. In this work, Baratashvili distinguishes between word and verse in Georgian poetics and proposes verse as "the main thing in this world." He also discusses the relationship between form and content and clarifies the structure of Georgian verse. His vision of poetry as primarily didactic in function and his emphasis on utilitarian values marks a departure from the Persianate tradition that had hitherto dominated Georgian literature. Related to this, it also inaugurates an approach to literature that reflected the values of the European Enlightenment which was beginning to impact Russian intellectual life.

Story of Queen Rusudan In 1732, Baratashvili published, on the order of Vakhtang VI, a versified version of the anonymous *Story of Queen Rusudan* (რუსუდანიაანი/ *Rusudaniani*), a 17th-18th c. prose collection of didactic tales that borrows extensively from Arab sources. The collection concerns the life of Rusudan, the queen of an imaginary country called Iamaneti located "on the border of the East and West." Although the poem is a work of the imagination rather than of history, Rusudan may be a fictionalized version of the historical Queen Rusudan (c. 1194–1245), daughter of Queen Tamar by David Soslan, who awaited her son's return from Mongol captivity for decades.

Teimuraz I and Mamuka Baratashvili Although their styles and literary orientations differed radically, both Teimuraz I and Mamuka Baratashvili shared in common the experience of exile. Both writers passed much of their lives far from the land of their birth. Teimuraz I died in Astarabad, Iran, while a prisoner of the shah. After the death of Vakhtang VI in 1737, Baratashvili became a subject of the Russian state.

Sayat Nova While early modern Georgian poets continued to write in Georgian even as they suffused their verse with Persian themes and lexicons, early modern Armenian and Azeri poets wrote extensively in Persian. The Georgian-born poet who called himself Sayat Nova (Aruthin Sayadian, 1712–1795) is the best known early modern Armenian poet. The exact origins of Sayat Nova's name are unknown but it has been suggested that it is derived from the Arabic *sayyid* meaning "Lord" and Persian *nava*, meaning "song." Others have proposed that his name means "new time," and combines the Arabic *sa'at* (time) and Russian *nova* (new). Sayat Nova was associated with the royal court until he fell in love with the king's

sister and became an itinerate bard, in the tradition of the Armenian *gusan* and the Azeri *ashuq* who performed poetry in public spaces.

Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar's invasion In 1759, Sayat Nova became a priest in the Armenian Apostolic Church. He was killed in Tbilisi in 1795 by the invading army of Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, an event that marked a significant turning point in Georgia's literary, cultural, and political orientation. The violence of the invasion caused a permanent break with Persian literary legacies and led the leaders of Georgia to turn to Russia for support. Initially, Mohammad Khan gave Sayat Nova a chance to live, on the condition that he convert to Christianity. But like Ketevan at the court of Shah Abbas, Sayat Nova refused to renounce his faith in order to appease the sultan. In return for his steadfastness, he was summarily beheaded.

Sayat Nova's Languages Over two hundred poems by Sayat Nova are extant in three languages: Armenian, Georgian, Persian. In addition to his skill as a poet and reciter of poetry, Sayat Nova was also a skilled player of the *kamancheh*, a bowed string instrument, and two related instruments widely used throughout the Caucasus and West Asia but particularly in Georgia, the *chonguri* and *tambur*.

Sergei Parajanov Sayat Nova's profile was further increased in the 20th century with Sergei Parajanov's surrealist film *The Color of Pomegranates* (*Nran Guyne*, 1969). Rather than trying to reconstruct Sayat Nova's life in all of its historical detail, Parajanov presents a tableau vivant of scenes from Armenian life and culture; his experimental style has made this film a masterpiece of Armenian cinema. Sayat Nova's work and legacy were further popularized in Georgia by the poet and scholar Ioseb Grishashvili (1889-1965), who translated Sayat Nova's poems and helped to popularize them.

Azeri. Like Georgian literature, Azeri poetry also has its share of poet kings. Shah Esmail (1487-1524) was the founder of the Safavid dynasty and, ironically given his role in promoting the Persian empire, among the best-known poets of early modern Azeri.
Shah Esmail

He chose for himself the name Khata'i meaning "the wrongful one." Around fourteen hundred verses by Shah Esmail in Azeri and forty verses in Persian are extant. The impact of Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings* was so heavily on his consciousness that he chose to name his own children after characters in that epic. Following his defeat of the Uzbeks at Battle of Merv in 1510, which established Safavid control over the region of Khorasan, Shah Esmail commissioned the poet Hatefi to compose a poem in the style of the *Book of Kings* celebrating his victory and the newly-established Safavid dynasty. Shah Esmail's own poems, however, dealt more often with love than with battles and war.

Hurufi tradition After his defeat of the Ottomans at Caldiran in 1514, Shah Esmail abandoned the pursuit of empire and dedicated himself to poetry. Alongside Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*, the Hurufi tradition as articulated by Nesimi exerted a great influence on Shah Esmail's poetics. Many of his poems engage with Hurufi alongside Sufi and Alevi (Anatolian Shi'a) themes. Alongside the ghazals for which he is most renowned, Shah Esmail composed a work called the *Dahnama* in *masnavi* (rhyming couplet) form, which is comprised of ten letters between the lover and beloved. The exchange of letters ultimately culminates in their union, and ends with a series of ghazals that have the same meter as the *masnavi*.

Armenian. The 16th and early 17th centuries are often considered to be among the least productive periods in Armenian culture, mostly due to the war that was fought on Armenian soil between the Safavids and the Ottomans. After 1639, with the end of the Ottoman-Safavid war, a new period in Armenian literature begins. Gradually, Armenian writers began to create a literature that was entirely independent of the church. For a tradition in which most earlier writers had some kind of clerical affiliation, this heralded a major change. Secular poetry began to reflect the experience of laypeople, and genres such as satire and comedy increased in popularity. The poets Khasbek, Tavit Saltoretzi, and Galoust Gayzag played a leading role in developing this new secular sensibility. For example, Saltoretzi's poem "In Praise of Flowers" is a compendium of poems on one hundred different kinds of flowers, each of which is celebrated for its color, scent, provenance, and use.

Clerical and secular literature Tensions between clerical and secular literature were reflected in the Armenian language itself, with those affiliated to the church preferring more classical idioms, and those more committed to secular literature preferring vernacular forms of expression. Although early modern Armenian literature was dominated by secular poets, there were also poets more aligned with the church, such as Galouste Amassiatzi, whose poetry reacted against these secularizing tendencies.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) In what contexts was the influence of Persian literature most evident in the poetry of the southern Caucasus?
- 2) How did poets from the southern Caucasus express the originality and uniqueness of their respective traditions?
- 3) In what ways was the tension between the Armenian church and secularizing poets manifested in early modern Armenian literature?

19TH CENTURY

Georgian. By the 19th century, Georgian poets had shifted their allegiances almost entirely from Persia to Russia. Even though certain genres of Persian poetry continued to function as models for Georgian poets, European Romanticism—for the most part mediated by Russia—exerted a more decisive influence on the new generation of Georgian poets. The Romanticism of Pushkin and Lermontov was paradigmatic for Georgian poets like Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817-1845), who is most famous for his epic poem on Georgia's defeat by Agha Muhammad Khan, "Georgia's Fate" (1839).

Solomon Dodashvili Baratashvili's teacher was the famous Solomon Dodashvili (1805–1836). Dodashvili was an intellectual and reformer who was inspired by the Decembrist movement that aimed to overthrow the Russia monarchy during his studies at St. Petersburg University, from which he obtained a master's degree in philosophy. On receiving his degree, Dodashvili returned to Tbilisi, where he worked as a teacher at a local gymnasium (high school) for members of the Georgian nobility, including Baratashvili. Baratashvili's exposure to Dodashvili was cut short when the latter was expelled from Georgia in 1832, following a failed plot to bring Russian rule over Georgia to an end. Although Dodashvili's co-conspirators favored the restoration of the Georgian monarchy, Dodashvili was invested in establishing a republican form of government—that was neither colonial nor autocratic—in Georgia. He was instead arrested and deported to Vyatka in central Russia, where he died of tuberculosis.

Nikoloz Baratashvili Alongside his famous long poem, Baratashvili was also a pioneer in the lyric genre, which he introduced to Georgian literature on the model of European genre norms. Although he left only forty lyric poems behind and died of malaria while still in his twenties, Baratashvili is widely considered the most outstanding Georgian lyric poet during his lifetime.

Grigol Orbeliani Another influential Georgian poet who was heavily influenced by European Romanticism was Grigol Orbeliani (1804-1884). The two poets were in fact related: Baratashvili was the nephew of Orbeliani's sister. In the struggle between Iran and Russia for control of the Caucasus, both poets clearly favored Russia. Their political loyalties shaped their aesthetic preferences. Orbeliani even served as a general in the imperial Russian army, and wrote odes such as "A Toast, or A Night Feast after War near Yerevan [სადღეგრძელო ანუ, ომის შემდგომ ღამე ლხინი, ერევნის სიახლოვეს]," on the Caucasus wars. While Baratashvili wrote primarily in a lyric mode, Orbeliani preferred the epic grandeur of the martial ode, which he refashioned to suit his Romantic ethos.

Erekle II Also like Baratashvili, Orbeliani was born into an aristocratic Georgian family. His father served at the court of the last Georgian king Erekle II, and his mother was a granddaughter of Erekle II, whose decision to place Georgia under Russian protection in 1783 was memorialized in Baratashvili's "Georgia's Fate." Orbeliani also played a role in canonizing the figure of Erekle II for posterity. Grigol Orbeliani published under the name Qaplanishvili, in order to distinguish himself from two of his cousins who were also poets and who shared his last name: Alexander and Vakhtang Orbeliani.

Plot of 1832 Orbeliani was educated, like Baratashvili, at a local gymnasium for the nobility. He became involved in the same revolutionary plans that led to the exile of Dodashvili, the plot of 1832 to bring an end to Russian rule over Georgia and to reestablish Georgia as an independent country. He was briefly imprisoned in Tbilisi, but not punished after his release, since his involvement in the attempted coup had been limited and he had been absent from Georgia. Orbeliani's main contribution to the failed coup were translations from Decembrist writings and a poem entitled "The Weapon."

Orbeliani to Qazbegi Notwithstanding his early support for a Georgian uprising against Russia, Orbeliani spent the remainder of his life serving in the tsar's army. The liberal reforms of Vorontsov, the Russian-appointed Viceroy of the Caucasus from 1844-1853, went some distance towards resolving this seeming contradiction. Yet it was a contradiction that characterized the literary output of many early 19th century Georgian poets, divided as their work was between a fascination with European learning and reforms that reached them through Russian channels and their desire for Georgian independence and sense of solidarity with the colonized peoples of the North Caucasus. (Another poet whose life and work were shaped by a similarly contradictory set of allegiances is Alexandre Chavchavadze.) Georgian writers such as Titsian Tabidze were to adopt positions quite different from—and critical of—Orbeliani in the subsequent century. Another Georgian writer whose attitude towards Russian rule was diametrically opposed to that of Orbeliani's was Alexandre Qazbegi. Ironically, Orbeliani was the first major writer of the older generation to recognize Qazbegi's talent, and hailed his novel *Elguja* (ელგუჯა, 1881) as a masterpiece.

Fathers and Sons Towards the end of his life, Orbeliani became entangled in a conflict between the "fathers" and "sons" of Georgian literature. Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli were the leaders of this new movement, who opposed Russian rule and the Russian monarchy and criticized the older generation for its service to the tsar. In 1874, he authored a caustic attack in verse against the literary style this new generation used in their writing.

Armenian. Many great Armenian poets came of age during the 19th century, at a time when Armenia and Armenians were divided between the Ottoman and Russian empires. Among the most prominent of poets during this century were Hovhannes Hovhannisyán (1864 –1929), Perch Proshian (1837– 1907), Smbat Shahaziz (1840-1908), Siamanto, born Atom Yarjanian (1878 –1915), Daniel Varoujan (1884-1915), Alexander Tsaturyan (1865-1917), Ruben Zardaryan (1874–1915), and Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923), known as the national poet of Armenia. Siamanto, Zardaryan, and Varoujan were all killed during the Armenian genocide; since their works pertain mostly to the 20th century, they are discussed later. This is also the century during which Armenia's oral tradition began to be recorded as in the landmark collection of Ghewont Alishan (1888).

Shushanik Kurghinian While Georgian and Azeri poetry was dominated by men throughout the 19th century, women poets began to have a significant impact on Armenian during the 19th century. Outstanding Armenian women poets from this period include Shushanik Kurghinian (1876 –1927), and

Zabel Sibil Asadour (1863-1934), and Heranush (Nargiz) Arshagian (1887-1905). Although she died at the young age of eighteen, Arshagian produced important work in many different genres. Kurghinian's ambition was to be a voice for the oppressed, and all of her poetry reflects this goal. She was born in Alexandropol (present-day Gyumri), which was then part of the Russian empire, to a poor cobbler. From early childhood, she worked as a weaver and potter while also pursuing her education. At the age of seventeen she joined the Armenian Social Democrat Hunchakian Party. Founded in Geneva in 1887, the party's primary aim was to secure Armenia's independence from the Ottoman empire. It was through Kurghinian's involvement in this party that she met the Armenian writer Avetik Isahakyan. Kurghinian was heavily impacted by the Russian Revolution of 1905. In her autobiography, she recalls how it led to her awakening as a poet and inspired her to write poems about workers. Her first book of poetry *Ringings of the Dawn* (*Arshaluysi ghoghhanjner*, 1907), was a direct response to the 1905 revolution. Her second book of poetry was rejected by the censor. She settled in Yerevan in 1926, and died at the age of fifty-one.

Jivani Another important Armenian poet who belongs to the oral tradition of Armenian bards (*ashugh, gusan*) is Jivani, born under the name Serob Stepani Levonian (1846–1909), near Akhalkalaki in Georgia. Jivani first rose to fame in Tbilisi, a city that was the center of literary activity for all peoples of the Caucasus throughout the 19th century. He then moved to the Armenian city of Alexandropol, where he flourished for nearly three decades amid its vibrant musical culture, before returning to Tbilisi. All in all, Jivani authored over eight hundred songs, in different styles, ranging from the romantic to the satirical. His songs about friendship, poverty, lawlessness, and the impact of foreign invasions resonated with the concerns of everyday Armenians, who were far removed from the elite strata of society. Jivani's songs were influential on Armenian music, and on Russian authors such as Maxim Gorky and Valery Bryusov.

Azerbaijan. Even before Tbilisi became a cultural mecca for Azeri and Armenia writers, the Karabakh Khanate was a center of Azeri literary culture throughout the 18th and early 19th century.

Vagif Molla Panah Vagif (1717-1797), an Azerbaijani poet who was also minister of foreign affairs (*vizier*) for the Karabakh khanate, played a leading role in shaping this literary culture during the 18th century. Vagif also helped to establish political relations between Russia and Georgia and the Karabakh Khanate. During the 19th century, the best-known Azeri poets were all born in Panahabad (present day Shusha), then the capital of the Karabakh Khanate: Kasim bey Zakir (c. 1784-1857), the female poet Khurshidbanu Natavan (1832-1897), and Mir Movsum Navvab (1833-1918).

Kasim bey Zakir Kasim bey Zakir is regarded as the most outstanding Azeri poet of the early 19th century. He is known for his satirical verse, which led to his being banished to Baku for a brief period. Zakir's satirical poetry criticized the fanaticism of the Muslim clerical class and the corruption of the local aristocracy and the Russian administration it served. Another genre in which Zakir made his mark is the poem of complaint (*shekayat-nameh*). These poems were addressed to famous authors such as Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh and Ismail bek Kutkashensky, the first Azeri novelist. Zakir combined Persian and Russian influences in his versified animal fables, which bear traces of the Perso-Arabic story cycle *Kalila wa-Dimna* and the fabulist Ivan Krylov.

Natavan Khurshidbanu Natavan, the only daughter of the last ruler of the Karabakh khanate, was best known for her lyric poems, both ghazals and quatrains (*rubais*). She was instructed in European languages as well as music and painting during her childhood, and became an accomplished painter. After her son's death in 1885, she used the penname Natavan, meaning "powerless" in Persian.

Mir Movsum Navvab Mir Movsum Navvab is among the last representatives of classical Azeri literature and culture. He passed his entire life in Panahabad. Alongside poetry, his many talents included astronomy, carpentry, chemistry, math, music history, and the visual arts. Navvab established the first typography in the Karabakh khanate, which enabled him to run Azerbaijan's first printing press, as well as a literary group called Society of the Forgotten (*majlis-i-faramushan*) and the first music society in Azerbaijan, called Society of Singers (*majlis-i-khanende*). He wrote in the tradition of Molla Panah Vagif.

Vagif Although the literary histories of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have been narrated by and large as separate histories until the 19th century, they became increasingly intertwined when this region

came under Russian rule. To give just one example, the Armenian historian, writer and translator Mirza Yusuf Nersesov was responsible for publishing Vagif's Azeri poems for the first time, half a century after Vagif's death, in Temir-Khan Shura, the provincial capital of the Russian imperial administration in Daghestan. This publication was followed a decade later by the hugely influential translation of Vagif's poetry into German by Adolf Berge with the assistance of Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh. The publication history of Vagif's work, which involved Armenians, Azeris, and Germans, provides a fitting testimony to the Caucasus' multilingual literatures.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What influence did European Romanticism exert on the development of poetry in the southern Caucasus?
- 2) What were the attitudes of Georgian poets towards Russian rule in the Caucasus?
- 3) What role did women writers play in Armenian poetry during this period?

20TH CENTURY

Comparisons. The intertwinement of Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri literatures throughout the 19th century was further intensified during the 20th century, with the establishment of the Soviet Union that unified these different countries and cultures into a single whole. During this period, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia was now part of the same Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Each had their own literature that was taught in school and recognized as the language of the state, alongside Russian, yet the uniform modes of governance that were imposed on them brought their literatures into closer alignment. The only missing link within this literary configuration were the parts of Armenia which remained part of the Ottoman empire until its collapse in 1922.

Armenian. The Armenian genocide of 1915 radically changed the face of 20th century Armenian literature, and resulted in the displacement and the murder of many of the greatest Armenian writers.

Varoujan In the domain of poetry, Armenian poets such as Varoujan, Siamanto, and Zardaryan. Varoujan was born Daniel Tchboukarian in Sivas in Central Turkey in 1884. He studied at the Mourad-Rafaelian school in Venice until 1905, when he entered Belgium's Ghent University, where he studied literature, sociology and economics. In 1914, he formed the literary group Mehian (Temple), which also included a magazine, with Hagop Oshagan and several other major Armenian writers (Aharon Parseghian, Gostan Zarian, and Kegham Parseghian). Varoujan published three volumes of poetry during his lifetime. A fourth volume, *The Song of the Bread*, was an unfinished manuscript, at the time when he was tortured to death along with four of his travelling companions at the onset of the genocide. Published posthumously in 1921, *The Song of the Bread* celebrates a world that had already vanished: the agricultural life of the Armenian peasant farmer of Anatolia.

Siamanto Siamanto was another innovator in Armenian poetry who was killed during the genocide. He was born Atom Yarjanian on the upper shores on the Euphrates in 1878. His teacher named him Siamanto after one of the characters in his stories and he used that name in his publications for the rest of his life. After the Hamidian massacres of 1896, during which hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed, Siamanto fled to Egypt and then Paris, where he entered the Sorbonne and began studying Middle

Eastern literature. After completing his studies, Siamanto moved to Geneva, where he became a contributor to *Droshak* ("Banner"), the official newspaper of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), a democratic socialist party founded in Tbilisi in 1890. He led a nomadic existence between Paris, Zurich, and Geneva, before returning to Constantinople after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.

Siamanto's Innovations Siamanto was one of the first Armenian poets to engage extensively with European literary modernism. He is credited with introducing free verse into modern Armenian literature. Two of his poetry collections, *The Manner of a Hero* (1902) and *The Invitation from The Fatherland* (1903) particularly bear the imprint of European modernism. Even as he looked forward and developed a new literary aesthetic, Siamanto was also engaged by the literature of the past, in particular the legacy of medieval Armenian poetry. Like medieval Armenian poets, Siamanto avoids end rhyme but makes ample use of internal rhyme (assonance and consonance). Many of his poems follow the metrical patterns used by medieval Armenian poets, such as the iambic sixteen syllabic form of Nerses Shnorhali. Pioneering a new aesthetic while reworking past precedents, Siamanto's poems combine subjects and themes from Armenia's past alongside urgent contemporary issues. His poems are dedicated to ancient figures in Armenia's past such as "Saint Mesrop." Another theme that captured his imagination is the Armenian pagan pantheon, as seen in poems such as "The Prayer of Navasart for Goddess Anahid."

Charents The poets of Soviet Armenia, such as Yeghishe Charents (1897–1937) and Avetik Isahakyan (1875–1957), were relatively more fortunate than their fellow Armenians born in Ottoman lands in that they avoided genocide, even though they too were persecuted. Charents was born Yeghishe Abgari Soghomonyan to a family of carpet dealers in Kars, then part of the Russian empire. He shared Siamanto's passion for literary modernism and similarly created a reputation for himself as an innovator in poetic style. Charents served in World War One, and witnessed the aftermath of the Armenian genocide while on duty in Van. After witnessing the horrors of war, Charents' support for the Bolsheviks was solidified; he came to see them as protectors of the Armenian people. In 1919, Charents was appointed director of the Art Department in the Soviet Ministry of Education. In 1921, he returned to Moscow to study at the Institute of Literature and Arts founded by Russian poet Valery Bryusov, who took a deep interest in Armenian literature. During this time, he composed the autobiographical *Charents-name*, the title of which adds a Persian suffix to his penname.

Charents and Avetik Isahakyan While travelling through Italy in 1924, Charents met Avetik Isahakyan. He founded a short-lived union of writers, called "November" after returning to Armenia in 1928. Charents' writing have been translated by many great writers, including Valeri Bryusov, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Arseny Tarkovsky, Louis Aragon, into their respective literatures. Armenian-American writer William Saroyan met Charents in Moscow in 1934, and wrote a short story about him many decades later in his short story collection *Letters from 74 rue Taitbout or Don't Go But if You Must Say Hello to Everybody* (1971).

Isahakyan's Life Like Shushanik Kurghinian, Avetik Isahakyan was born in Alexandropol. He was educated at Gevorkian Theological Seminary in Etchmiadzin (Vagharshapat), where many Armenian poets and writers had studied in centuries past. Like Siamanto, Isahakyan joined the Armenian Revolutionary Federation which advocated for an independent Armenia and a democratic socialist political system. He was arrested in 1896 for his revolutionary activities and spent a year in prison in Yerevan. Isahakyan's university education took place at the University of Zurich in literature and the history of philosophy, before returning to the Caucasus.

Isahakyan's Migrations 1908 was another year of widespread imprisonment, not just for Isahakyan, but for over a hundred other Armenian writers and intellectuals who passed several months of that year in Tbilisi's Metekhi Prison. As soon as he was released, Isahakyan realized that he had to leave the Caucasus. He migrated to Berlin, where he co-founded a German–Armenian Society that advocated for political autonomy for the Armenian people. Isahakyan was among those who had a foreboding of the Armenian genocide before it occurred. He never trusted the promises made by the Young Turks that Western Armenia would become independent once the Ottoman empire was overthrown. Isahakyan wrote about the genocide and its gruesome aftermath in his *White Book* (Յիշատակարան).

Isahakyan's Poetry In addition to being a creator of new poetry, Isahakyan was a cultivator of poetry from times past. He spent seven years (1899-1906) working on *The Songs of Haiduks* (Հայրուկի երգեր), which was an anthology of poems dedicated to the Armenian struggle for freedom. Isahakyan also found inspiration in other world literatures, such as Arabic. One of his most famous poems is his verse narrative of the life of the eleventh century Arabic poet Abu Ala al-Maarri (1909-1911). Consisting of seven "suras"—Isahakyan borrowed the term for chapters within the Quran—the poem narrates the travails of the blind Syrian poet who is well known for his atheistic and heterodox views.

Georgian. The trajectory of Georgian poetry during the 20th century parallels that of Armenian poetry in many respects, particularly with regards to the encounter with European literary modernism. Like their Armenian counterparts, Georgian poets born in the late 19th century were inspired by the Russian, French, and German avant-garde. Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, Galaktion Tabidze, and Giorgi Leonidze among others coalesced into a literary group who called themselves the Tsisperqantselebi (ცისფერყანწელები; "The Blue Horns"). Although this group would later be centered around Tbilisi, many of the poets involved came from western Georgia, and the movement got its first start in the western Georgian city of Kutaisi. In 1918, the Blue Horns relocated to Tbilisi, and held regular meetings at the Cafe Kimerioni.

The Blue Horns Many of the poets involved in this movement would develop distinctive literary styles, yet they shared in common a fascination with the European avant-garde and a desire to participate in this cutting-edge literary movement. The poets of the Blue Horns movement also broadly rejected the realistic aesthetic and the civic orientation of the earlier generation, as exemplified by poets such as Ilia Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli. (These generational dynamics simply repeated in many respects the conflict between fathers and sons that shaped the prior era of Georgian literature.) They aligned themselves with the Symbolist and Decadent movements within European poetry and published a magazine entitled *Blue Horns*, after their movement. Notwithstanding their rejection of civic poetry, Blue Horn poets also shared in common a desire for Georgia's political independence.

Paolo Iashvili and Titsian Tabidze When the Soviet regime established itself in Georgia in 1921, Blue Horn poets did not align well with the new government. They left the official Union of Writers and formed their own group, which was not destined to last long. The most talented poets from the Blue Horns circle were either executed by the Soviet regime during the Stalinist purges, or faded into obscurity. In 1937, at the height of Stalin's purges, Paolo Iashvili killed himself with a hunting rifle during a meeting of the Writers' Union, having refused to denounce his friend and fellow poet, Titsian Tabidze. For his part, Titsian Tabidze only lived four months longer. He was expelled from the Writers Union in October 1937 and soon thereafter arrested by the NKVD (the Soviet Interior Ministry, an agency tasked with police work and overseeing prisons and labor camps). Titsian was executed in two months later. His death remained a secret for many years. His family was falsely informed by the Soviet state that he had been exiled to Siberia.

Galaktion Tabidze Like Paolo Iashvili, Titsian's cousin Galaktion Tabidze killed himself when the pressure of living in an oppressive regime became too heavy for him to bear. His wife Olga Okudzhava had been arrested and executed in 1941. Her death, along with that of Titsian, filled Galaktion with despair. Galaktion spent the last decades of his life alone, and addicted to alcohol. Prior to the establishment of Soviet power in the 1920s, Galaktion had achieved recognition for his Symbolist sensibility and his lyrical voice. His *Crâne aux fleurs artistiques* (1919) established him as the preeminent poet of his generation, according to many critics. Although equally original, the poems of Titsian and Iashvili were more austere and demanding of the reader. Galaktion by contrast entered immediately into the imagination of everyday Georgians as the greatest poet of the twentieth century. His funeral attracted tens of thousands of people even in the context of Soviet oppression. He is buried in Tbilisi's Mtatsminda Pantheon, alongside other major Georgian poets such as Ilia Chavchavadze, Alexander Griboyedov, Ioseb Grishashvili, Vazha-Pshavela, Baratashvili's teacher Solomon Dodashvili, and the Blue Horn painter Lado Gudishvili.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What was the relationship between the Soviet state and modernist poets?
- 2) What kinds of formal innovations characterize the literary output of 20th century Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri poets?
- 3) How did modernist poets of the South Caucasus conceptualize literary modernism?