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Rediscovering Language

I've tried to remember when and how I became acquainted with my greatest literary passion. All in vain — it is as if it has always been a part of me. And it has: stories about martyrs and other saints and hymns dedicated to God and the Virgin Mary. I'm talking about Old Georgian Literature.

What fascinated me the most? Maybe the story of St. Shushanik, a woman living in the 5th century, who divorced her husband, since he had abandoned Christianity and was going to wed the princess of Persia? Or maybe the story of St. Abo, a teenager who traveled to Georgia, became Christian, was martyred and, now is a patron saint of Tbilisi? Abo, who walked to the place of execution, chanting the psalm for the dead, greeting the death as his old friend? All this and even more — it's the language, its marvelous richness and awe-inspiring musicality.

I fell in love with medieval texts. This was my secret passion, though — I was a lonely teenager back then, hunting for old Georgian texts in the book collections of her grandma and her aunt who were both philologists. At the same time, I was ashamed of this passion — this was not something a typical teenager would read. In the evenings, after being done with my homework, I would go through the Georgian Dictionary by Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, a scholar, writer, and diplomat, who lived in the 18th century. I fell in love with old, forgotten words and their poetic definitions coined by Sulkhan-Saba.

This is how I rediscovered the Georgian language.

Especially one story has always inspired me: a story of losing and finding languages. It's a story of Euthymius the Athonite — called Ekvtime in Georgian. The story is part of his biography written by St. George the Athonite, who translated the gospels and psalms into Georgian. It is his translation that the Orthodox Church of Georgia uses in worship. The story goes as follows:

The father of St. Ekvtime, St. John, took him to Mount Athos. He taught his son both Greek and Georgian. However, as Ekvtime was being raised in a Greek-speaking environment, he almost entirely forgot the Georgian language. His father was worried, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Once Ekvtime became so ill that his father thought he would die. So he went to the church to send a priest to Ekvtime — to receive the Holy Eucharist — and prayed to the Virgin Mary. When he returned, he noticed the smell of incense. This was how he knew that the Virgin Mary had helped. Then he entered the room and saw his son, alive and healthy, sitting on the bed. He asked what had happened. Ekvtime answered that while his father was gone, a glorious queen had come into the room and asked in Georgian:

“What is, what hurts, Ekvtime?”

He had answered:

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“I’m going to die, my queen.”

She simply said:

“There’s nothing wrong with you. Now get up and speak Georgian fluently.”

From then on, the Georgian language would escape Ekvtime’s mouth like a spring, purer than that of all Georgians. So, St. John encouraged him to use his talent and translate books. St. Ekvtime translated more than 150 books from Greek into Georgian. He also translated some books from Georgian into Greek, for instance, *Balavariani - The Story of Barlaam and Josaphat* (a Christianized version of Buddha’s story). The Greek original of which had been lost, so St. Ekvtime reintroduced it to the Byzantine Empire and, therefore, to Europe. At the same time, he was the archimandrite of the monastery, so on days he would manage the monastery, and at nights he would translate - I’m sure, many translators and writers can relate to this...

My thoughts often revolve around this hard-working and firm monk who breathed through the language. I owe him: whatever I write comes from the texts I’ve read; allusions and references are very extensively present in my writing. The first story with this characteristic as well as the ending of my first novel contains references to Ekvtime’s story that I’ve just retold. What does it mean to speak a language? How does one express oneself through language (especially, if one is “the other”, an outcast, as the protagonist of my first novel)? Or maybe the language itself is a protagonist of the story, with its characteristics and its character development? These are the questions that St. Ekvtime’s story has inspired me to contemplate on. These are the questions that I contemplate whenever I write.