

Georgian Christian Thought and Its Cultural Context

Memorial Volume for the 125th Anniversary of
Shalva Nutsbidze (1888-1969)

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SHOTA RUSTAVELI'S ROMANCE *THE KNIGHT IN THE PANTHER'S SKIN* IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN CHIVALRIC ROMANCE:
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

Maka Elbakidze and Irma Ratiani

At the turn of the twentieth century the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep gained insight into a particular genre of social transition that he named the *Rites of Passage*. He based his ideas on his observation of the cultural transitions of renewal which are given form through rites and ritual. According to his theory, the energy inherent to any system eventually dissipates and has to be renewed at crucial intervals. This renewal transition is accomplished in the social milieu through various rites of passage which hold great importance in the context of changes in social status, movement between tribes and castes, and the process of aging.

Van Gennep defined the structure of the Rites of Passage in terms of the “preliminal,” which includes separation from a previous world or a transitional period, and the “post-liminal,” which is distinguished by “ceremonies of incorporation into the new world.”¹ Thus the process of passage or transition as a whole is characterized by three phases: 1) isolation or separation; 2) marginality or liminality; and 3) incorporation or re-aggregation. Separation implies the isolation of a chosen individual, the “initiate”, from the fixed social or cultural structure. Liminality expresses the initiate’s ambivalent state, her or his passage to the intermediate social zone, the so-called limbo; and the final phase of incorporation corresponds to the initiate’s return to society with a renovated social status or “re-aggregation”².

Almost half a century later, Victor Turner re-evaluated van Gennep’s theory in the context of structural anthropology. Turner defined the liminal phase as an “interstructural situation” that exists among different positional structures. According to Turner, the liminal state is a transitional one; in other words, it is a threshold passageway between states determined by

¹ T. L. Carson, *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power* (Lanham/New York/Oxford: University Press of America, 1997), 1–2.

² ი. რატიანი, *ქრონოტოპი ანტიუტოპიურ რომანში. ესქატოლოგიური ანტიუტოპიის ინტერპრეტაციისათვის* [I. Ratiani, *k'ronotopi antiutopiur romanši. eskatologiuri antiutopiis interpretac'iisat'vis (Chronotope in the Anti-Utopian Fiction. Towards the Interpretation of Eschatological Anti-Utopia)*] (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 2005), 162.

social place, status, maturity, socio-economic position, physical location, mental and emotional condition, war and peace, and other factors. Whereas the first state of transition in the Rites of Passage, that of separation, provides for a time of detachment and detaching from the earlier period, place, or state in the cultural or social context, in the last phase of this process, the time of aggregation, there is a return to a stable position, one that is socially located but different from the former phase—a transformed, altered condition. Between the beginning phase of separation and the concluding phase of aggregation, one finds a threshold. This betwixt-and-between time is filled with ambiguity. The person, therefore, who is moving through the Rites of Passage, the “transitional being” or “liminal persona,” is defined by a name and by a set of symbols.³

According to Turner, an individual's temporary disunion from fixed social structures grants this person not only an ambivalent social status but frees him or her from any law, norm, or rule of social conduct, resulting in a status which is by nature undefined and obscure. In a liminal state, Turner claims, a person is neither “here” nor “there” but rather “in-between” the legally, traditionally, conventionally, and ceremonially established positions (“betwixt and between”). Thus the individual is not under the influence of the effects of her or his “preceding” or “future” statuses, but rather in an undefined position, awaiting the realization of reconstructed and renewed cultural models and paradigms. The individual occupies a gap between the worlds, becoming a sort of conceptual medium between alternative structures of “here” and “there.”

The main purpose of Turner's liminal theory was the creation of a positive “alternative” as a valuable opposition to objective reality. This positive alternative represents the consequence of the creative will, a valuable synthesis of creative imagination and acting potential, which abandons the existing, solidly established historical and cultural structures and, through the most intense experiences, attains the desired state of transformation.

Turner's studies have shown that the anthropological theory of liminality may be adapted to literary models as well. With a view towards demonstrating vividly the liminal process, Turner considered works of dramatic genres, although he believed that liminality may be equally reflected in any genre of literature.

³ V. W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 97.

Within the circles of literary critics of Georgian texts, Irma Ratiani was the first to attempt to compare liminality theory to the eschatological anti-utopia model.⁴ According to her, literature by its essence and destination is a liminal phenomenon that fulfills the function of a transitional phase, a kind of “transit carriage” traversing the space between the reality ruled by force and the distant cosmos elaborated by imagination.

A literary work is itself an intermediate liminal occurrence, not only drawing a distinction between isolating dissimilar worlds, but also, based on a particular model of the world, generating a subjective alternative, a new model of the “other world.” The basic angle of transformation is the liminal phase, the transit space, which separates two different worlds.

The axes of this high-cost transitory quality in literature are the time-space categories: rites of literary transformations can be reached through special forms of artistic time and space, invented and developed by the author. In this case, Rites of Passage or the ritual of passage becomes a bridge to another, oppositional reality. It requires an entirely different interpretation of time and space.⁵

On the basis of the anti-utopian novel, in particular the works of V. Nabokov and M. Javakhishvili, Ratiani notes that the liminal phase is an intermediate, transitory, and ambivalent condition, in which the individual dissociates from the normative context and creates an oppositional antipode of the world through the process of valuable transformation. Thus, the liminal state is a place of special, mostly sacred, time and space, set apart and separated. The mythic journey and its corresponding rites usually rely on the symbol of death and rebirth, corruption and rising. The rite of transition is a transition from one model of existence to another.⁶

We believe that the theory of liminality, as one of the significant modern contributions, may be successfully applied to research into *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, a medieval chivalric romance by the Georgian classic writer Shota Rustaveli. However, whereas the anthropological theory of liminality is realized with great precision in the age of modernism, in medieval texts it acquires a specific shape, leading to different conclusions.⁷

Before examining this issue in detail, it is necessary to establish the method by means of which one might apply the concepts outlined above

⁴ See Ratiani, *ქრთნობები ანტიუტოპიურ რომანში*.

⁵ See Ratiani, *ქრთნობები ანტიუტოპიურ რომანში*, 173–174.

⁶ See Ratiani, *ქრთნობები ანტიუტოპიურ რომანში*, 176–177.

⁷ See the application of this method to the medieval chivalric romances in K. M. Ashley, ed., *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism. Between Literature and Anthropology* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).

to this late medieval text in an appropriate fashion. Thus, we must consider the specificity of the chronotope of the medieval romance (to which we ascribe *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*)—it is this genre that largely determines the artistic-aesthetic side of any such literary work.⁸ In texts of this type, the basic narrative is devoted to travel and quest; the character moves from one model of existence to another, *from the space of everyday life to that of adventure*. This movement expresses the artistic-structural opposition that exists between court civilization (*castle*) and “wild nature” (*the world existing beyond the castle*). Hence the plot of the romance is enacted against the backdrop of a certain spatial dichotomy: *the royal court* as opposed to *the forest*. We may provisionally call the former *one's own space*, and the latter *another's space*. In these romances the concept of time is also differential, for in parallel to real time, the so-called *time of adventure* “acts” here, broken up into separate sections of time which, for their part, are used to develop concurrent and non-concurrent events and to link distant and nearby spaces.⁹ As the motif of quest or adventure implies the movement of the protagonist to an *alien*, abstract world, time is accordingly represented in different aspects: at times it is static and at other times, dynamic. Common time does not exist—for each character it flows differently. More precisely, the perception of time and its flow depend on the characters' way of life. In our view, the alternativeness, characteristic of liminality, is related to the specificity of the chronotope of the medieval chivalric romance and is revealed in binary opposition: on the one hand, one's *own* ordered space and the *other's* chaotic space, and, on the other hand, between the *real time* and the so-called *adventure time*.

Accordingly, the Rites of Passage in the chivalric romance are implemented in two different schemes: they are linked either to 1) the motif of roaming/search, or to 2) the motif of ranging. Thus we obtain oppositional temporal-spatial models connected to two different character types: roaming characters and static characters. Both character types are represented in the system of characters of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. The former is represented by Avtandil and the latter by Tariel. Before analyzing the

⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin developed the term chronotope to speak of the way in which language, especially literature, describes and represents time and space. See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258. [editor's note]

⁹ М. Бахтин, *Эпос и роман* [M. Bakhtin, *Epos i roman (Epic and Novel)*] (Saint Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000), 80.

question of character types in detail, we shall first introduce the plot of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* very briefly.

Unlike European chivalric romances, here two principal characters are central: the Arab military commander, Avtandil, and the commander-in-chief of India, Tariel. The Arab royal court constitutes the opening point of the plot of the romance, whose harmony is broken by the appearance and sudden disappearance of an unknown foreign knight (it later transpires that it was Tariel). Subsequently, the narrative develops against the background of the chain of motifs of loss-search-discovery, the basic motif of the medieval chivalric romance. At the request of his beloved lady (Tinatin), Avtandil sets out in search of the knight and, after three years of roaming about, he locates his abode in the cave of giants (*devis*) in a deep forest. Avtandil learns that the knight had lost his love. The knight had looked for her on land and on sea and, after losing all hope of finding her, he had left the human abode and in desperation and anger had begun to live among the wild beasts. Avtandil promises to help him, and thus renews the long quest for Tariel's love, Nestan-Darejan. Thus, like European romances, both minor conflicts (the appearance of a strange knight, causing the departure of Avtandil from his love) and major ones (the loss of Nestan-Darejan and Tariel's journeys) are identifiable in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. These conflicts are resolved in the finale of the work: the knight's rescue of Nestan-Darejan from captivity by the *kajis*, a fictional people, and their return to Arabia, where Avtandil, too, marries his beloved. The plot of the romance returns to its starting point and the circle is closed.

One may offer several observations that relate to the analytical issues presented above:

1. The extensions of time and space of the so-called roaming characters (Avtandil or, in the West, Lancelot) are strictly set (with regard to these characters, a concrete span of time is always indicated in the text, e.g., three years or a field to be crossed in seven days, and a specific action is defined). In the majority of chivalric romances, this organizing function is defined by a barrier that is set up on the character's path: an unexpected, and generally dangerous, trial. It should be noted that this trial emerges not only in the shape of some physical obstacle. In most cases it is connected with the intervention of an event, of fate, God, or Providence. Accordingly, the *adventure time* occurs subsequent to a sudden break in the course of real, regular time, and absolutely natural phenomena assume unexpected, non-envisaged shapes.¹⁰ On the other hand, the space surrounding the

¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Epic and Novel* (in Russian), 80.

character is transformed into such an unusual world that even the *supernatural* is perceived as regular. The protagonist is temporarily detached from the events taking place in reality, leading him or her to a different reality.

At this point we should note the following: although Avtandil voluntarily takes on the function of “roaming” about, his travel is dictated by his beloved lady (Tinatin). One might think then that Avtandil’s decision in this case is not his own choice, but instead he fulfills the duty of a lover and vassal, bearing in mind the future prospects (proving his love for his lady). It is on this condition that Avtandil leaves his *own space* and familiar society (the phase of separation), and, departing in search of the foreign knight, he crosses the boundary between *this* and the *other* reality. As a result, Avtandil finds himself in an intermediate, ambivalent social zone (according to Jacques Le Goff’s terminology, in *no man’s land*), where he feels most acutely the lack of the tangible or intangible values that he had left in his *own space*. In Avtandil’s case these are: love (the sun) and the world and its pleasures, expressed metaphorically by the harp, lyre, and pipe. The text emphasizes this loss of the familiar; similarly, the places in which these adventures unfold are alien to Avtandil, and he is also alien to this environment (“He arrived in a certain dreadful country, exceedingly rough: for a month he saw no man, no son of Adam”¹¹—the landscape is dreadful, rough, uninhabited, and wild. In this section of the text the dichotomies that are characteristic of *native* and other *alternative* spaces are clearly highlighted: homeland (*one’s own space*) / the area beyond the boundary; the entertainment and pleasures of the palace (*drinking and singing*) / roaming in the strange setting (*ranging*); delicacies consumed at a feast / sustenance gained by hunting or with a bow; genuine love / casual liaisons. This state of an individual to which the Georgian *ghariboba* (“travelling,” “wandering”) corresponds is attended by the experience of homelessness, solitude, and doom. A character who is transferred to the intermediate, liminal zone logically faces the choice of either returning or continuing on his way, which is naturally linked to a new way of measuring time (“three years save three months had passed”; “he has two months left”).¹² Yet the prospect of an alternative reality acts oppressively on the knight, throwing him into thought and doubts: Avtandil does not choose to take on this task,

¹¹ Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, translated by Marjory Scott Wardrop: *The Man in the Panther’s Skin*. A Close Rendering from the Georgian Attempted by M. S. Wardrop (Tbilisi: Literatura da Khelovneba, 1966), 60.

¹² Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* (tr. Wardrop, 60).

which is difficult and dangerous. Yet if one asks why he does end up taking it on, one observes that he does so because he finds himself in a situation resulting from a task that was set for him by *another person (his love)*, rather than by his own wish. Accordingly, the stages that an involuntarily displaced character must overcome in the liminal phase become extremely acute: *suffering* (“the shedding of tears flowed to increase the sea”)¹³; *wishing to die* (“He wished to strike his heart; sometimes he uplifted his knife”)¹⁴; and *triumph over his “wishes” through faith* (“Without God I can do nothing, my tears flow in vain. No one can change that which is decreed, that which is not to be, will not be”).¹⁵ The projection of Avtandil’s aspiration is directed not to an alternative temporal-spatial environment, as demanded by the literary connotations of liminality theory, but backward, to a real, adapted model of time and space.

If this is true, what function might the liminal phase perform in relation to the “wandering character” of the medieval Georgian romance? It is quite clearly charged only with an ethical function, implying the incorporation of the character in the native model with renovated ethical norms and social status: when the knight’s hazardous road comes to an end, he returns to *his space* and society. In *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* Avtandil’s *incorporation* in his usual socio-cultural setting implies returning to the initial point of the closed circle, in which he is placed throughout the novel. Although Avtandil is topographically the most dynamic character in *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, he still acts within a closed circle, for the existence of a concrete goal makes for the restriction and finitude of Avtandil’s space. Thus, no matter how far he travels from the initial point of *his space*, he neither wishes nor is capable of breaking this barrier and moving into infinite space. To put it differently, Avtandil’s path is, to a certain extent, linear: from Tinatin to Tinatin. Accordingly, the end of the road envisages a return to a habitual setting, or incorporation, which is the exact opposite of the dreadful, rough world. At his return home Avtandil finds everything as he had left it: “a sumptuous and magnificent banquet”, “gifts were bestowed”, jacinth goblets, ruby bowls, and heaps of rare gems. The difference lies only in his moral-ethical and social status. Through his long period of roaming he fulfilled his human duty, which is dictated, according to the code of chivalry, by man’s own conscience, and, most importantly,

¹³ Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* (tr. Wardrop, 59).

¹⁴ Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* (tr. Wardrop, 59).

¹⁵ Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* (tr. Wardrop, 61).

he attained his desire; as Rustaveli put it, "The sun so met royalty as he was worthy of it."

2. The static characters fall into the so-called static model (e.g., Tariel, or Yvain in Chrétien de Troyes' *Knight of the Lion*), in which time (as well as space) changes for the character at each step, given that each concrete stage of the character's adventure is determined by a temporal-spatial model characteristic of a given moment. Manipulation with a chronotope takes place according to the writer's fantasy and skill, taking into account the compositional and artistic fabric of the work.

In Tariel's case, transfer (separation) from one's *own space* to *another space* is connected with "madness" or a grave mental condition experienced by the character. Following the loss of his beloved, the ranging, raving knight sets up his abode in a cave deserted by giants (*devis*), becoming fused in a way with nature (cf. Yvain). Tariel wanders in a rectilinear, restricted space. The walls bounding this space fall momentarily, and Tariel moves to the phase of dull-wittedness, haziness, and expectation. Tariel's cave, in this case, reflects his personal choice. It is the material expression of his liminal condition. Naturally, however, the boundary between *this* and *other* realities is not only topographical. It is, in the first place, an alternative mental condition, placing the individual in an absolutely different dimension. This new reality in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, conveyed through the phrase "forth from the world," is opposed by the *world*, that is, a model of the real world. Tariel, who has come to hate this false and perfidious fleeting world following the loss of his beloved Nestan-Darejan, is in a hurry to leave it, to reach his love (his ideal), which seems to be inconceivable *here* (in the lower world), but which is possible *there* (or in the *upper abode*). It is natural that Tariel considers his approaching death to be a feast, for the possibility of meeting Nestan-Darejan in the netherworld is more attractive than "irksome life." Accordingly, the *transitional zone*, in which Tariel finds himself after his roaming, and which develops against the background of a rather gloomy and joyless décor (ravine, bullrushes, forest, and field), is a kind of linking corridor, a landmark between this world and the other world, the world that is oppressive of human freedom and the eternal abode granting bliss. It is a classic example of the liminal phase. It is also important that Tariel feels that death is approaching. But this is not yet the world (*there*) where Tariel intends to meet his love. Accordingly, for the hero whose "earlier" status is suspended, while the "next" is not yet to be seen, time freezes, the course of time in general loses meaning, and the "stopwatch" of *adventure time* also ceases.

Unlike Avtandil's case, the projection of Tariel's aspiration is directed towards an alternative temporal-spatial setting, as required by the literary conceptions of the theory of liminality. A real, adapted model of time-space is completely alien to him, at least, alien in its existing form. If so, one might ask what function the liminal phase performs in relation to the "static character" of the medieval Georgian romance. It is charged not only with an ethical, but with a structural function as well, being related to the idea of a full transformation of the environment. Accordingly, although Tariel is topographically a relatively static character, he is imprinted with active inner dynamism.

Tariel's spatial immobility—and, accordingly, his madness—ends only when he regains hope and purpose, that is, the prospect of regaining love and altering the setting. Although in this section of the text we can observe the gradual shrinkage of space and an attempt to place it within rigidly confined boundaries, Tariel's path is oriented towards creating a new order: his "return" presupposes a basic ethical and structural transformation of the way of life of his homeland, a transformation of an unjust state to a just one. Tariel has suffered ethical transformations, but he has also altered the living conditions and environment around him. The *incorporation* of the character, which took place against the background of the alternation of phases of death and rebirth, fall and rise, does not end with the taking of the Kajeti fortress, although the descriptions of the council of the three and the battle scenes stress Tariel's physical, mental, spiritual, and moral revival. Tariel's *return*, or union with his own society, is brought about by the same scheme by which his separation had taken place, but, of course, in the opposite direction: the cave of the *devis*, the sea, the royal palace, and the wedding scene, its logical conclusion.

In conclusion, one may note that unlike in European chivalric romances, in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* we observe several variations with a single concrete phenomenon, i.e., spatial transitivity. There may be several explanations for this difference: 1) in the place of one hero holding center stage in the European traditions, in the Georgian novel there are two main characters at the center of the romance; and 2) the presence of the two alternative types (dynamic/static) of characters conditions the course of the ritual of transition, or Rites of Passage against the background of differing temporal-spatial models and differing specificity.