

# Georgian Poetry between Tradition and Innovation

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## Abstract

The present paper investigates one of the prominent traditions of modern English poetry, Georgian poetry which was common at the turn of the twentieth century. It aims to remove the misconceptions about this trend and whether it was really a mere copy of traditional English poetry of nature. This is done by citing a number of representative poets and poems which show the innovative aspects of this poetry.

## Georgian Poetry between Tradition and Innovation

The term "Georgian" cannot be said to signify a coherent school of poetry with consciously agreed upon tenets and principles. Nor does it represent a movement in the same sense as Imagism and Symbolism for instance. Rather, it denotes a group of conservative poets who began to publish verse during the first and second decades of the twentieth century and who were generally content to adopt the traditional conventions, forms, and diction of English poetry. In them, one finds a faithful expression of the native British element of verse rather than the

European cosmopolitan element that was best realized in T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, Ezra Pound, and other avant-gardist poets who followed Pound's motto "make it new". The label "Georgian" was chosen by Edward Marsh, the man who assembled their work in one volume entitled Georgian Poetry (1912) which was the sort of a personal choice by Marsh himself.<sup>1</sup> That anthology, therefore, does not necessarily include all poets who contributed to the Georgian tradition. The 1912 anthology was followed by four more collections in 1915, 1917, 1919, and 1922 respectively making a total corpus of forty poets<sup>2</sup>. Among the poets associated with the Georgians are D.H. Lawrence, Walter De La Mare, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Edmund Blunden, and Rupert Brooke. However, Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen, Charles

Sorley, and Andrew Young were never represented in Marsh's collections though they were in the true "Georgian" tradition<sup>3</sup>. In view of this, it is better to rely on theme and technique as yardsticks for classifying a poet as Georgian, rather than on mere inclusion in Marsh's anthology. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, this poetry derived its essential quality and inspiration from the countryside and nature, and "in the hands of less gifted poets", became a copy of the "diluted and middle brow conventional verse of the late Romantic period. The term 'Georgian' came to be a pejorative term, used in a sense not intended by its progenitor, Marsh"<sup>4</sup>.

Difficult though it is to give an accurate definition of the term "Georgian", yet it is possible to identify certain features common to the members of the group. H. Coombes writes that "Georgian poetry derives [primarily] from early and later nineteenth century romantic poetry." In his view, the Georgians took over the weaker characteristics of Romanticism such as "vague emotion, inexpressive sing-song rhythms, emphasis on surface verbal music for its own sake, and the tendency to fantasy and dreams without a very strong human interest"<sup>5</sup>. They looked for guidance to Milton, the Romantics, and the Victorians, rather than to the Metaphysicals and the Neo-classicals whose model was followed by innovative poets especially those coming from America<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, Babette Deutsch finds in the Georgians "something closer to the Victorian pathos than to the panic of the age of Anxiety in their insistence "on loss, the grief of aging, and the stab of personal extinction"<sup>7</sup>. This is especially true of Walter De La Mare whose lyrics lament the encroachment

of the "prison-house" upon the child's world of fantasy, and the blunting of his senses by materialism no less poignantly than Wordsworth:

*Look thy last on all things lovely  
Every hour, Let no night  
Seal thy sense in deathly slumber  
Till to delight*

*Thou have paid thy utmost blessing*  
There is often a common view of De La Mare's poetry as "making the actual magical, and the magical actual". He himself says: "Between children's dream and their reality looms no impassable abyss"<sup>8</sup>. He wrote poems from the child's consciousness, set in a fairy-tale atmosphere of mystery, beauty, and wonder. This is the poetry of withdrawal from the ugliness and horror of the modern barren actuality'. a poetry that bridges the gap between the actual and the real bringing into his reader's mind a beyond world, one which could be captured only by children and poets in moments of vision<sup>9</sup>. Yet this world is not all beauty and charm, it also entails much evil, terror, and mystery. It is the world of "sinister innocence" to borrow Richard Ellman's exact words<sup>10</sup>.

*"Is there anybody there?" said the  
Traveller,  
Knocking on the moonlit door;  
And his horse in the silence champed  
the grass  
Of the forest's ferny floor.*

This poetry with its haunting gothic atmosphere is in the true tradition of the medieval literature of terror and mystification.

Another prominent figure of Georgian poetry is Rupert Brooke, whose verse exhibits a "genuine sensuousness" as intense as that of Keats<sup>(11)</sup>:

*Down the blue night the unending  
columns press*

*In noiseless tumult, break and wave  
and flow,  
Now tread the far south, or lift rounds  
of snow*

*Up to the white moon's hidden  
loveliness.  
Some pause in their grave wandering  
comradeless  
And tum with profound gesture vague  
and slow,*

*As who would pray good for the  
world, but know*

*Their benediction empty as the bless*  
Yet Brooke was also a war poet who  
approached war from a romantic point  
of view, seeing in it a heroic and noble  
endeavor, an attitude that is most finely  
expressed in his war sonnet " the  
soldier":

*If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there is some corner of a foreign  
field*

*That is for ever England*  
Even if the soldier dies in a foreign  
land, the place where he is buried  
becomes a British soil since his body is  
England's.

Another group of Georgian poets,  
however, approached war from an  
opposite view emphasizing the waste,  
pity, and meaninglessness of war.  
Siegfried Sassoon, another soldier poet,  
obsessed by the agony and panic of war  
of which he had an actual experience,  
attacked it bitterly in his verse. Wilfred  
Owen stayed with Sassoon in hospital  
for sometime during the First World  
War and from him Owen learned to  
expose the ugliness and poignancy of  
war. In a short lyric entitled "Futility",  
he presents a poignant elegy for the  
unknown soldier:

*Move him into the sun  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.*

*If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.*

Here is a bitter "lament for the loss of  
youth, beauty and intelligence in war,  
an elegy for the rich but wasted gift of  
creativity in human beings <sup>12</sup>:

*Think how it wakes the seeds-  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.  
Are limbs, so dear –achieved, are  
sides,  
Full –nerved- still warm- too hard to  
stir,*

*Was it for this the clay grew tall?*

*- O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?*

The modern huge war machine and  
advanced killing technology left no  
place for courage or heroism. It only  
intensifies the sense of loss and waste  
subsequent on war. The poem could be  
seen as an elegy for the anonymous  
soldier who killed in war and his body  
is never recovered gets. This unknown  
soldier could be Own himself for a  
soldier expected death at any moment.  
Own could be amenity himself in this  
poem he dies. On a wider, existencice  
level, The poem could be seen as an  
ellgy for man at large. This means the  
whole realm of human life because  
meanings or "futile". The pessimistic,  
existencice outlook of life is itself a  
genuine touch of modernism.

Owen employed "Para rhyme"- a  
kind of imperfect rhyme (assonance) in  
order to reflect the sense of chaos,  
discordance, and unease of war by  
denying the reader the satisfaction that  
comes from perfect rhyme <sup>13</sup>. Para  
rhyme is Owen's most notable technical  
innovation which indicates, no doubt,  
that the Georgians were not passive  
dreamers, aloof from the major current  
of life at the turn of century, nor were  
they unaware of the necessity of  
innovation in modern poetry.

Another circle of Georgian poets were specialized in "country sentiment and the pursuit of Beauty". F. R. Leavis mentioned two of them, Edmund Blunden, and Edward Thomas. The former found his relief in a new "Arcadia" realized in "rural England, seen, not only through the memories of childhood, but also through poetry and art <sup>14</sup>:

*I heard the graybird bathing in the rill  
And fluttering his wings dry within  
thorn boughs  
Which all embowered the rill; with  
tiny bill  
The robin on red-berried spray bade  
rouse  
One whom I could not see, a field  
away.'*

*I heard the passing girl to her young  
man say'*

*"O look, there's a buttercup". For  
Autumn brought there still .....*

(October Comes)

Blunden tried to create a pastoral world in the true tradition of Augustan pastoralists and Romantic nature-poetry <sup>15</sup>. His poetry is imbued with a deep, poignant sense of nostalgia for a past, simpler, more organic world when man lived in perfect harmony with nature.

Edward Thomas is, in Leavis's view, "a very original poet of rare quality who was associated with the Georgians by mischance". "He devoted", Leavis writes, "a great technical subtlety to the expression of a distinctively modern sensibility. "The poem with him becomes an emotional experience which he lives and registers in the form of "random jotting down of chance impressions and sensations, the record of a moment of relaxed and undirected consciousness : <sup>16</sup>"

*Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the  
wild rain*

*On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me  
Remembering again that I shall die  
And neither hear the rain nor give it  
thanks*

*For washing me cleaner than I have  
been*

*Since I was born into this solitude.*

*Blessed are the dead that the rain  
rains upon*

*But here I pray that none whom once I  
loved*

*Is dying to-night nor lying still awake*

*Solitary, listening to the rain*

*Either in pain or thus in sympathy*

*Helpless among the living and the  
dead,*

*Like a cold water among broken  
reeds,*

*Has not dissolved except the love of  
death,*

*If love it be for what is perfect and*

*Cannot, the tempest tells me,  
disappoint.<sup>17</sup>*

Like Wordsworth, Thomas feels the mysterious haunting presence of "Nature" and the emotions that it inspires within men. The simplest, and commonest element of nature can fill man with consolation, serenity and joy which are to be gained only in solitude <sup>18</sup>.

The "exquisite particularity" of this verse, however, distinguishes it from Georgian nature poetry. His persistent habit of sensibility and recapturing of sense impressions is akin to Virginia Woolf's methods of writing which drew attention to the inner world of subjective experience <sup>19</sup>.

From this brief survey of Georgian poetry, it becomes clear that the bad connotation of the term "Georgian", and may be of the region of king George as such, unjustly obliterate the literary achievement of this group of poets who never were dull imitators of nineteenth century stale convention. On

the contrary, the Georgians did produce one of the most prolific and versatile achievements of English poetry, one in which appears the tension caused by the conflict inside these men, between the allure of tradition and the demands of modern sensibility.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Press, A Map of Modern English Verse. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.106.

<sup>2</sup> J.A.Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms. Harmord sworth: Penguin Book, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Press,p.106.

<sup>4</sup> “Georgian Poetry”, Encyclopedia Britannica Article,  
<http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article.7/1/2008>.

<sup>5</sup> H. Coombes "Hardy, De La Mare, and Edward Thomas "In The Pelican Guide to English Literature ,vol.7, ed. Boris Ford,(London: Harrap, p957), p.146.

<sup>6</sup> Press, p.10

<sup>7</sup> Babette Deutsch, Poetry in Our Time, (New York: Columbia University press, 1975), p.255.

<sup>8</sup> Coombes, p.141.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Wollman, Ten Twentieth Century Poets,(p.4)

<sup>10</sup> Richard Ellman and Rubed O’clair, (New York: www.Nortonacompany.com,1988), p.234

<sup>11</sup> F. R. Leavis, "The Situation at the End of World War 1 "in Modern Poetry: Essays in Criticism" ed. John Hollander, (London: Oxford Univ. press, 1968)p.54.

<sup>12</sup> Allen Freer and John Andrew, (eds.) The Cambridge Book of English Verse: 1900-1939, (Cambridge, The univ. press, 1970), p.196.

<sup>13</sup> I bid.

<sup>14</sup> Leavis, p.57.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Allott (ed.) The Penguin Book of Eon temporary Verse, (Penguin Books: 1962), p.136

<sup>16</sup> Leavis, p.77.

<sup>17</sup> Cite by Leaves, p.77.

<sup>18</sup> Wollman, p.77.

<sup>19</sup> Leavis, p.77.

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#### ملخص البحث

#### "الشعر الجورجي بين التقليد والتجديد"

تركز هذه الدراسة على احد الاتجاهات في الشعر الانكليزي الحديث الذي اصطلح عليه ب (الشعر الجورجي) والذي تراكمت حوله مجموعة من الانطباعات الخاطئة باعتباره شعراً تقليدياً رتيباً لايقدم سوى صورة مكررة الضيق في العصر الوسيط والرومانسي. وتبين الدراسة إن الشعراء الجورجين لم يكونوا مجرد مقلدين بل أنهم اغنوا التراث بلمحات ونواحٍ تجديدية كثيرة وإنهم أيضاً عاشوا الصراع بين بريق التراث والحنين إلى الماضي من جهة ومتطلبات الحداثة والتجديد من جهة أخرى.