

Confessions of a Comparatist

A life and love(s) in letters

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When I turned fourteen, I discovered Dostoevsky. Not just one story or novel, but the entire collected works, from *Poor Folk* and *White Nights* to *The Idiot* to *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*. I read Dostoevsky, not as a professional scholar or even as a casual reader, but as a lost soul, obsessed with mortality, searching for life's meaning. Psychedelic drugs had failed to yield the insight I was seeking, so I turned to literature. Dostoevsky posed questions in his characters' meandering monologues that no one else had posed for me. I read Dostoevsky, out of necessity, out of love, out of longing for the truth he was seeking.

I read Willa Cather, Gustave Flaubert, and Thomas Hardy—every single novel by each of these writers that I could get my hands on—yet none caused the same palpitations that Dostoevsky did. At first, I read Dostoevsky in English translation, mostly by Constance Garnett, but also in the more recent renderings of David McDuff and Jessie Coulson. The translations were sometimes stilted, concealing as much as they revealed, and leaving me with the longing to experience the texts in their original form. I kept that longing in reserve as a dream to be attained once I had extracted everything I could from Dostoevsky in English.

I was not the only adolescent soul-searcher to come under Dostoevsky's spell. Many such readers have moved on, their teenage passions supplanted by adult obsessions: bills, children, and the mortgage. Yet my encounter with Dostoevsky left a mark. His novels revealed to me how books could transform lives. Dostoevsky's crooked and erratic syntax, his broken clauses, and the sharp interjections of his characters sharpened my sense of myself as a writer, and even more intensely, as a human being. Dostoevsky's fictions revealed how far away dreams could generate new possibilities. Reading in public the books I loved invariably triggered the same

questions: Is your family Russian? Do you have Russian origins? The love of literature became conflated with the love of the self.

It was not by coincidence that, after arriving at the University of California Berkeley as a transfer student from a community college, and faced for the first time in my life with an embarrassment of riches in terms of the courses to choose from, I signed up for a course in the nineteenth-century Russian novel. Nor should my next step come as a surprise. On the recommendation of my professor of nineteenth century Russian literature, I applied to spend a summer in St. Petersburg, where I could explore the city under the cover of the white nights that provided a backdrop for much of Dostoevsky's early fiction, while reciting Russian poetry along the banks of the Neva. My decision to major in Russian alongside Comparative Literature was a direct outcome of these encounters.

Graduating from the university presented a dilemma. My love for Dostoevsky never faded, but my appetite for academic studies of Dostoevsky's oeuvre, given that all his work had been published and his texts fully edited, was rapidly diminishing. I came to doubt that anything was left to be accomplished. Specialists will always be able to find nooks and crannies of Dostoevsky's oeuvre that merit further exploration. They will cite unpublished notebooks, letters, and diaries. They will point to the need for further contextualisation, for finer-grained analysis, for placing every word Dostoevsky ever wrote under the scholarly microscope. We can never have too much of Dostoevsky, but life is short, and in the battle for significance few writers' marginalia can compete.

Gradually, I came to understand that I could never become an effective Dostoevsky scholar. Although Dostoevsky scholarship was the future that my professors envisioned for avid readers like me, my ambitions lay in a different direction. My Russian professor dreamed that I would write a dissertation on Dostoevsky, and then live out the remainder of my days as a Slavist. It seemed an insufficient justifica-

tion for my time on earth, but no alternative was within easy reach.

II

This story begins in love and ends in an undefined territory that hovers between past and present, the memory of something once loved, now a lifetime away. While I have no map for this geography, I can trace the inchoate bundle of feelings that every language I have ever loved has generated for me. I can chronicle how I was formed by these languages, before I cast them aside and alighted on new medium for my passions, sorrows, and grief. This is a story about love, language, and their mutual relations. As with any love story, this story has no end, although it does have a beginning.

Sorting out a future took me far away from Russian literature, my first love. I found myself in Tbilisi, Georgia, a city I had chosen for its proximity to Chechnya, with an indeterminate plan of mastering Chechen. Instead, I mastered Georgian. I embarked on the study of Persian. I became captivated by Georgia's neighbours, most particularly Iran, a country that had been the major imperial power in the region until the rise of Russia that spanned the reigns of Peter the Great (1682-1721) and Catherine the Great (1762-1796).

In verse after verse of Hafez, Sa'di, and Rumi that I encountered at my Tbilisi dinner table with the help of a Georgian instructor of Persian, I compared their poetic utterances to my prosaic present. A verse from Rumi in particular haunted me:

یلسغ یروآرب تضایر بآ هب رگا
درک یناوت افص ار لد ترو دک هم

If you bathe in the water of austerity,
your opaque heart will gleam lucidly.

Deftly juxtaposing two opposing worlds, the water of austerity

with the opacity of the heart, this poem condenses the basic principles of Persian poetics. It is a distant world in any context, and deliberately so; in keeping with Sufi norms, Rumi conjures a way of being that is constitutively opposed to life in this world. The world of Persian poetics is many universes removed from the granular urban realism of the nineteenth century Russian novel.

We acquire new identities through new languages. New selves are born every time we speak in a foreign tongue. I became a stranger to myself. In Tbilisi, my first linguistically acquired identity was Georgian at first. After a year of living in the city and studying Persian at Tbilisi's Giorgi Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies, I began reading and speaking in Persian. I did everything I could to sever my ties to Russian, even as Dostoevsky's language continue to palpitate in me, like a beating heart torn from the body it used to sustain, or a tongue severed from its mouth, incanting, mechanically yet with passion, a forgotten code.

My Russian self is frozen in time, locked between a first love and a final parting. My other linguistic selves are marked many times over by the people I met (often in books) and wished to become. New languages grafted new beings onto me, new extensions, new limbs, new articulations of my inward consciousness that had eluded me so long as I was restricted to my native tongue. With every language, my self was made anew.

Not coincidentally, the acquisition of new selves was accompanied by love in the conventional sense as well: with another human being. I learned to speak, think, and breathe Georgian while falling in love with a government official working for an MP in the Georgian Parliament. He introduced me to Georgian modernist poetry, to the verses of Titsian Tabidze, Paolo Iashvili, and Galaktion Tabidze. Although the excitement of discovering Georgian poetry continues to palpitate, my relationship with this language was severed when the relationship that sustained it broke apart.

Persian has a different place in my life. Less dependent on other humans, my love for it did not originate in any single relationship.

Although it has been intertwined with various people, my love for Persian is autonomous of the people who have shaped my life. I first spoke this language on a daily basis with an Iranian I met in Damascus while he was in voluntary exile, just like me, although his turned out to be more permanent than mine. As we parsed the challenging verses of Khaqani from Shirvan (northern Azerbaijan, d. 1199) together, while I was working on my dissertation, the language we shared became the basis of our affection. That relationship faded, yet Persian remained. Persian has carried me from Dushanbe to Hyderabad and four times to Iran: Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran, all the way to the shores of the Caspian.

Each of these journeys has been diverted from its course by geopolitics—leading to the imprisonment of Americans and Iranians, mutual bans on immigration, and hateful slogans on both sides—as a result of which the prospect of speaking Farsi everyday in Iran has remained a relatively distant dream. In some respects, my relationship to Persian is the diametrical opposite of the relationship to Russian that developed during my sojourn in St. Petersburg and Georgian during the two years I lived in Tbilisi. While living in Tbilisi, Georgian entered into the fabric of my life. I shopped, travelled, and bargained in Georgian. The avant-garde poetry of Titsian and Galaktion acquired the rhythms of an everyday request for a fresh loaf of bread from the *tone* (Georgian oven) beneath my window. Learning Persian called for a different kind of discipline, more akin to that of the classical pianist who seeks to master a well-known repertoire than that of the virtuoso who improvises at every stage.

As it does for any student of Persian or a Turkic literature, Arabic everywhere interweaves itself into the tapestry of my linguistic loves. This occurred most memorably during the months I spent in Damascus just prior to the war that began in 2011. Arabic has been a fleeting rather than constant presence, palpable during moments of heightened sublimity, such as while visiting a mosque, and then fading soon after. Only so much of a language in the sacralised register that Quranic Arabic presents itself to many non-Arab listeners can

be absorbed at one time.

The meanings of love are as various as language itself. It can mean the loss of control over one's self that follows from inspiration and the surrender of control that follows. This definition leaves many gaps, but it clarifies why love has happened to me so many times, and, equally, why this love has so rapidly disintegrated. The Platonic understanding of *eros* (as articulated by Socrates in the *Symposium*) envisions it as an ecstasy that passes, as all languages do. While they last, these loves are entirely subsumed, sustained, and consumed, by the verbal medium that gave them birth.

I did not fall in love with a Khakass from Siberia in order to gain fluency in Russian. Nor did I become enraptured with a connoisseur of Georgian poetry in order to improve my Georgian. Nor was my friendship with an Iranian poet consciously linked to the pursuit of Persian. Yet in each case my relationship with my interlocutors would have been different if the medium of our acquaintance had been my native language. Equally, the acquisition of my new linguistic identities would have been inconceivable in the absence of love.

Language was the medium of my affections, as well as of my grief. If the language of our love had been different, our relationships would not have been the same. When I began to develop a relationship with a Greek man, my first step towards a long-term relationship was to begin reading Cavafy and Seferis, mostly in English, but with interludes in Greek. I immersed myself in modern Greek in order to open myself to his ways of seeing his world. His indifference to my interest in the poets of his country signalled the beginning of the end of our short-lived relationship. Had he wished to read Cavafy with me, then a future with him might have been possible.

I dwell on the precariousness of these passions—on their fleetingness *and* their fluidity—to underscore how our lives are structured by our relationships to the languages we speak. When the love fades, the memories remain enshrined in language: the trace of what it felt like to be with that person, wrapped in a unity of body and mind. Every

lover offers the beloved a new self to inhabit, a new identity to call one's own, new eyes through which to see. So with language: new words generate new sounds for every tangible thing, new phonemes between the lips and the tongue, new relationships among places and spaces, words and things.

Russian was the first foreign language that I came to love, viscerally, with my flesh and soul. Knowing Russian—speaking, thinking, and feeling its poetry—extended my sense of myself. At times my love has morphed into an enmity inversely proportionate to the intensity of my former affections. Russian grates against me when it silences other selves, within me, as well as geopolitically, and especially in the Caucasus, where I passed two years of my life. Russian is also a language of unmatched lyricism and shocking beauty. The only feeling to the languages I have learned and loved that is beyond my reach is indifference.

I have been burned by language many times: by war, bureaucracy, and corruption, and by the same language that has defined what it means to be alive. Russian is a wound that has healed while scarring my insides, in the part of my brain that feels before thinking and thinks before it speaks. This feeling—this visceral memory of a love that once was and which will never live again—is inscribed in every new relationship with every new language. The death of the languages I used to love is part of my mortality, of my own perpetual decay.

Russian introduced me to intimacy in a foreign tongue, the linguistic equivalent of falling in love for the first time. Even when the love itself has passed, traces remain: the memory of what it was like to form on my lips the sounds that became the odes of Mandelstam, the laments of Akhmatova, the prophecies of Pasternak, and the lyrics of Esenin. The ability to feel as these poets did during the height of the purges that killed their loved ones introduced a new intensity into my soul, from which I have not recovered since.

Two poems by Mandelstam recur to me in moments of despair. The first depicts the poet gazing on the Black Sea, merging the

poem's eternal present with Homeric time. His every word a complete thought, he intones:

Бессоница. Гомер. Тугие паруса.

Insomnia. Homer. Taut Sails.

In the second poem, composed just under a decade before his execution, Mandelstam anticipates his arrest in his St. Petersburg home in 1930, during the height of the Stalinist purge that was to culminate in his execution:

Я вернулся в мой город, знакомый до слез.

I returned to my city, known to tears.

The tone is nostalgic and lyrical, so much so that this second poem provided the lyrics to a song by the Russian pop star Alla Pugacheva. Two very different sets of images, yet evoking cognate emotions, transporting me to other worlds, calling on my imagination to forge links across time and space. The feelings that the recitation of these poems stir in me will outlast my ability to speak. Yet these memories are for a feeling that belongs to the past. In the same way that love remains even when a relationship has reached an end, so does Russian belong to the category of former love.

The Georgian poet who resonates most deeply is Titsian Tabidze, whom I have translated ever since I was able to speak and read the language. Titsian's poems are alternately lyrical, preoccupied with the past, and political, anticipating the future. The lyrical register, in which he is known best, is epitomised in Titsian's reflections on his childhood in western Georgia. These verses, which conclude "Poem Landslide" written in 1927 and set in his native village, use poetic creation as an analogy for life:

მე არ ვწერ რექსებს... რექსი თვითონ მწერს,
ჩემი სიცოცხლე ამ რექსს თან ახდავს.
რექსს მე ვუწოდებ მოვარდნილ მენწყვს,
რომ გაგიტანს და ცოცხლად დაგმარხავს.

I don't write poems. Poetry writes me.
This poem walks with my life.
A poem is a landslide that carries me
away and buries me alive.

The political register is one with which Titsian is rarely associated. Yet it permeates his verse in underappreciated ways, particularly the poems written during the last decade of his life which touch on the history of resistance to Russian colonial rule in the Caucasus. Here are the concluding verses from “Gunib” (1937), a poem that names the site of

არ მისწოდია მე არასდროს ჯერ კაჯის თოფი,
არც გარესილი მრტყმია წვერზე რეკური ხმალი,
მაგრამ უეცრად ვაუკაცობამ მეც შემაშფოთა,
არ მინდა ვიყო მე პოეტი, სისხლით დამთვრადი,
და ამ ღამიდან დაწყებული დღე რაც კი გადის,
მე ვწერ პოემას: რომ წარეცხოს თქვენი ღაღატი.

I never pulled the fatal trigger.
I never donned the fighter's armour.
But suddenly I too am moved into manhood.
I don't want to be a poet drunk on blood.
Let this day be my penitence.
Let my poems wash away your treachery.

These verses contrast the poet, who imagines himself as a Muslim warrior resisting the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, with his

fellow Georgian poets, whom he judges as complicit in the imperial project. Composed within a couple of years of Mandelstam's lyric appeal to a St. Petersburg that he would soon be forced to abandon forever, these verses—which were some of the last Titsian ever wrote—similarly combine the prophetic and incantatory with the lyrical. Like all the poets and writers discussed here, Titsian Tabidze was a firm believer in the ethical importance of his vocation. Poetry for him is king of all. Whereas Dostoevsky claimed that beauty would save the world, Titsian argues in these verses that poetry of itself redeems all kinds of treachery, including the brutality of colonial conquest by his fellow Georgians, who participated in the bloody conquest of the Caucasus.

The relationship of the Russian language to the literatures of the Caucasus is systematically misunderstood, and pigeonholed into a relatively simplistic discourse of empire. One well-meaning but misguided inquiry is: Is Georgian related to Russian? Every time it is posed to me, I cringe. It's like asking whether Spanish is related to English for the sole reason that many Spanish speakers live in the US, or whether Arabic is derived from French and German because many Arabic-speaking migrants end up in Germany and France, or whether Persian is a Semitic language because it uses the Arabic script.

Languages influence each other through their shared histories, not genetic affinities. The histories that have brought Georgian and other languages of the Caucasus into relation with Russian are political as much as they are cultural. There is no deep genetic link; like any relationship, some degree of difference is needed to make it meaningful.

It was partly because I was disturbed by the reduction of linguistic plurality to ethnic difference—one of colonialism's many legacies—that I undertook to dispel the myth of a nationalistic Caucasus by learning more than one of its languages. Russian is many things. It is a repository of some of the twentieth century's most dramatic and monumental poetry. It is the medium of my first literary love, Dostoevsky. But it is not and never will be an adequate basis from

which to engage with the literatures of the Caucasus. In the context of the Caucasus, the insistent turn to Russian frequently expresses a monolingual colonial point of view, and embodies a relation structured by inequality. Of course, has also been the medium of expression for the critique of colonialism from the beginning of the Russian conquest. No language is ever entirely bound by its past, and Russian certainly has the capacity to facilitate communication among the many different peoples of the region.

I was drawn to Persian for reasons as visceral as those that drew me first to Russian and then to Georgian: because of the cognitive universes poetry in this language made possible. The suspension of belief induced by the recitation of Persian verses compelled me to continue along the path struck by Hafez and Saq̄di towards the annihilation of my self. In Islamic poetics, this is referred to as the opposition of *haqiqa*, the truth that exceeds figural representation, to *majaz*, the world of the imagination that is embodied in rhetorical figures. The thirteenth century poet Hasan Sijzi of Delhi, sums up this apperception well: “After tomorrow,” he states in a *ghazal*, “the days disappear [*az an farda ke pas farda nadorad*].”

The two languages I have loved the most—Russian and Persian—have been engaged in covert wars with the country into which I was born for the past several decades. Practically if not officially, the Cold War was over when I entered the world. Hence, US-Russian enmity did not visibly constrain my encounter with Russian literature. Born as I was a few months prior to Iran’s Islamic Revolution (1979), US-Iranian enmity has featured consistently in my life, constraining my horizons and limiting my mobility to Persian-speaking regions of the world.

As with many Americans born around the time of the Iranian Revolution, Iran has been an off-limits country for most of my life. While I have managed to visit Iran four times, each visit was brief and filled with anxiety. While this geopolitical hostility has made the geography of Persian into a region more accessible to my imagination than to my body, it has not limited my love for it. It has limited

the forms my love for Persian has been able to take, and the selves I have been able to acquire through my contact with it. Perhaps for this reason Persian does not induce in me the same visceral reactions as Russian does. The Persian familiar to me is the classical diction of Hafez and Sa'di, not modern Farsi.

Partly as a result of difficulty of travel to Iran, Persian has become for me the penultimate language of cosmopolitan identity, linking past, present, and future, Samarqand and Tabriz, Shiraz and Sarajevo, into a meaningful geography. It is a language of doubt and probability, of infinite horizons and continuously expanding possibilities. Only in Persian could Khaqani portray himself in his verse as a prophet, as the rightful successor to Jesus, not because he had been chosen by God, but because of his gift for poetry:

نیست اقلیم سخن را بهتر از من پادشا
در جهان ملک سخن راندن مسلم شد مرا

The kingdom of speech will never find a Shah better than I.
Dominating the land of speech is my indisputable destiny.

In Persian, concern for justice generates awareness of the cosmic fleetingness of existence, as in Sa'di's famous verse, *ba'ni adam 'uzve yek paykarand* ("the children of Adam are limbs of each other"). Georgian has a close equivalent to this Persian insight in the evocative word *tsutisopeli* (which literally translates as "a fleeting village," and means that the human community is but a wrinkle in time). Persian is a language that inspires dreams while questioning reality. In modernity, Persian has birthed the magic realist aesthetics of experimental texts like Sadeq Hedayat's *Blind Owl* (1936) and Bahram Sedeghi's *Heavenly Kingdom* (1971). Persian speaks and lives in poetry. This language's relationship to the world it references causes poetry to inflect countless aspects of everyday life.

Those who move from one language to another as I have done all my adult life are often assumed to possess an extraordinary gift for language learning. This view makes the mistake of viewing languages as innate qualities rather than acquired loves. There is indeed something about speaking a language that calls for more than pure labour. The qualities needed to learn to use a language are fortuitous, but the gift does not reside with the lover. Reading a text in a foreign language—or for that matter, in one’s native tongue—always requires exertion. The phenomenon of the polyglot is explained better by motivation—and ultimately by love—than by talent. To cultivate multilingualism it is more important to embrace a multitude of identities, than to have a ‘knack’ for languages, whatever this means. My multilingualism is driven by my need for linguistic difference as a feature of my encounter with every literary text. A need for the multiplicity within the languages that I speak, and the literatures I read, drives me forward in my journeys with languages, not an innate talent for language. My language learning is motivated entirely by love. When there is no love, there is no need for language.

I have cultivated the habit of reading in Persian, Georgian, and Russian, and in a range of other languages (Arabic, French, German, Italian, Chechen) to lesser degrees. Yet my identity, professional or personal, will never align with any single literary or linguistic tradition. René Wellek, the Czech founder of Comparative Literature following his migration to the United States in 1939, stated at the second congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (1958), “Comparative Literature arose as a reaction against the narrow nationalism of much nineteenth-century scholarship.” Wellek, a European transplant to the US following the Second World War, understood how literature could help us transcend national borders. Notwithstanding these auspicious beginnings for the comparative study of literature in the monolingual United States, Wellek felt compelled to lament the “strange system of cultural book-keeping,” that

had overtaken his discipline, and which had caused it to be dominated by “a desire to accumulate credits for one’s nation by proving as many influences as possible on other nations.”

Needless to say, Wellek regarded the zero-sum game that was fostered by the discipline of Comparative Literature in its nascent state as a dangerous development for the study of literature. As he insisted, “There are no propriety rights and no recognised ‘vested interests’ in literary scholarship...The whole conception of fenced off reservations, with signs of ‘no trespassing,’ must be distasteful to a free mind.” Although he was writing half a century ago, Wellek understood better than most readers today that literary traditions must be protected from the ideologies that underwrite nation states. The literatures to which I have dedicated my professional life—Russian, Georgian, and Persian—have too frequently been held captive by nation-based ideologies. Meanwhile, my personal and professional life has been a continual movement towards non-national and non-territorial multilingualism.

When projected onto literature, national categories underestimate this medium’s necessary subversion of all forms of ethnic exclusivity. Whether a scholar or a lover, a comparatist finds meaning and inspiration in the movement between and across languages, rather than in their static reinforcement of existing norms. A comparatist rejects mono-nationalism just as she rejects racism, closed borders, and narrow ways of seeing. She asserts no property rights over any literary tradition or national identity. She knows that Comparative Literature must find ways to contest the nation-state model of geopolitics that accounts for so many political travesties in our times and which creates insurmountable disciplinary divides, locking scholars away from each other and shutting down conversation. A comparatist recognises that partitioned scholarship is a recipe for war as well as intellectual stultification.

Every language inculcates its own ways of loving, and of being loved. Every language confers new identities on the reader, writer, and speaker. As a comparatist, I acquired my identities by loving po-

etry in the original language. Before I began to fret over its meaning, I first experienced poetry as music and responded to its cadences. As I internalised each language through its literature, I could have said with Wallace Stevens, “Music is feeling then, not sound.” Literary language is a collocation of sounds that also involve feeling. Meaning begins to matter much later in the aesthetic experience, and it is only at this point that national, religious, ethnic, and cultural categories become relevant. As a comparatist—as a lover of language’s many ways of being—I am committed to knowing and experiencing the collocations of sounds that precede meaning. This pre-conceptual usage of language is the only prism through which humans can cognize their place in the universe. This prism surrenders the self and recovers it, in a new verbal medium. It gives to every reader who desires a world larger than their current horizons a new way of belonging to a community of listeners, readers, viewers, and auditors in a cosmopolitan world.

Further Reading

The quote from Rene Wellek can be found in “The Crisis of Comparative Literature,” in *Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Werner P. Friedrich (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1959), 1: 153-6. Some of the experience of living in Tbilisi described here is recounted in more detail in Rebecca Ruth Gould, “Becoming a Georgian Woman,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 31.2 (2010): 127-144.

My translations of Titsian Tabdize are available in *Pleiades: Literature in Context* 37.2 (2017): 138-139; *Rhino Poetry* 16 (2016): 148; *The Brooklyn Quarterly* 7 (Online, 2016); *Tin House* (Open Bar Broadside Online, 2016); *Seizure* (2016); *The Adirondack Review* 18.1 (2016); *Lunch Ticket* (Online, Summer/Fall 2016); and *Silk Road Review* 15 (2016); *Prairie Schooner* 89.1 (2015): 37-38; and *Metamorphosis: A Journal of Literary Translation* 17 (1): 66-103

(here with translations of poems by Paolo Iashvili and Galaktion Tabidze). Other translations I completed in the times and places recounted in this essay include: *High Tide of the Eyes: Poems by Bijan Elahi*. Co-Translated with Kayvan Tahmasebian (New York: The Operating System, Glossarium: Unsilenced Texts & Modern Translations series, 2019); *The Death of Bagrat Zakharych and other Stories by Vazha-Pshavela* (London: Paper & Ink, 2019); *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, World Classics series, 2016); *The Prose of the Mountains: Three Tales of the Caucasus* (Budapest: Central European University Press, CEUP Classics series, 2015).

