

# **ANTHOLOGY OF GEORGIAN POETRY**

Translated by

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STATE PUBLISHING HOUSE «Soviet Georgia»

Tbilisi, 1958

**VAZHA PSHAVELA**

(1861 — 1915)

In Georgian poetry, the outstanding and exceedingly original Georgian poet Vazha Pshavela, is called "The Mountain Eagle". He was born in Pshavi a mountain region, into a peasant family, in which the traditions of Pshav poetry were reverently conserved. In 1882 Vazha Pshavela graduated from the teachers' Seminary in Gori. A year later he entered Petersburg University, where he studied law. However, through a lack of means, the poet soon left the university and returned to his native country, where he made teaching his chief pursuit, at the same time assiduously pursuing his own studies. He made a deep study of the classics of world literature and became familiar with philosophic and social doctrines. Despite the fact that the poet was greatly interested in the cultural and intellectual movement of his time, he voluntarily left Tbilisi, Georgia's cultural centre, and returned forever to his native hills, to his village of Pshavi, to the life of a peasant. The poet often wrote his poems by the light of the fire on his hearth, in his primitive hut.

Vazha Pshavela, together with the well-known Georgian novelist Alexander Qazbegi, were the first to introduce a fresh theme into Georgian literature — the mountains of Georgia. The poetic world of Vazha Pshavela is one of exceeding breadth, originality and variety. The life of the Georgian hillmen (Pshav-Khevsurs), their legendary exploits in battles for the defence of their native land, as well as their great mythology, are depicted in his works. The poet's world outlook finds expression not only in Vazha Pshavela's lyrical pieces, but also in his most interesting poems, "The Snake-Eater", "The Guest and the Host", "Bakhtrioni" and others.

Vazha Pshavela is known as an outstanding master of poetry.

## THE SNAKE-EATER

(An assembled group of Khevsuris are amusing themselves by drinking and singing in honour of warriors whose deeds have made the world wonder. They sing songs of praise to the accompaniment of softly humming panduris. Sitting with them is a pale-faced, grave and dignified figure. Strange tales are told of Mindia's past)

For twelve years Mindia was held  
A captive by the Kajis fierce.  
Estranged from home, from friends and kin,  
He spent his dreary days in tears.  
Thus moments, hours, weeks and months  
Through tedious seasons led him on,  
Tied to a rope of misery  
From blasted hopes and evils spun.  
Thoughts of his distant native land  
Like balm flowed o'er his maddened brain.  
He shut his eyes, and lo! there glowed  
The land of Khevsuri again.  
Dim visions of her snow-capped mounts,  
Her winding paths and murm'ring streams,  
His parents, kin and cherished friends  
Invaded all his thoughts and dreams.  
His lowly hut now seemed to him  
A paradise beneath the skies...  
And as he thought and pined for home  
Sobs burst from him, tears filled his eyes.  
With time he lost all faith and hope  
Of ever seeing home again,  
And longed to find relief in death  
From all his miseries and pain.

.....

Once o'er a blazing fire he saw  
A cauldron full of serpent's meat.  
It was the Kajis' choicest dish  
Which they with relish oft would eat.  
Now Mindia believed if he  
Ate of the loathsome meat, 'twould turn  
To poison in his veins and every  
Fibre of his body burn.  
He ate one piece, and sickness smote  
His every nerve: a chilling sweat  
Ran down his face, and he could scarce  
Repress the horror that he felt.  
But suddenly it seemed to him  
That from above flowed splendid light  
And spreading through his veins he felt  
A surging stream of strange delight.

New wisdom pierced his wond'ring brain;  
He saw the world with different eyes,  
He saw it smile, he heard it speak,  
He knew the meaning of its sighs.  
All things that breathed or lived had tongue,  
Held converse soft in language strange;  
And as he learned their secret thoughts  
He wondered much at all this change.  
Though Mindia's now sharpened eyes  
In deepest hell and darkness crept,  
Though earth and sky and forest, mount,  
Communed with him or silent wept,  
No wickedness or evil thought  
Entered his noble heart or brain.  
Thus skilled in Kajis' mystic art  
He strove to banish every pain.  
All feared his superhuman powers,  
His God-like strength and piercing eyes.  
The Kajis fumed and burst with rage  
To see the mortal rendered wise  
Inspired, full of life and courage,  
No more did Mindia despair.  
He cherished now the hope of breaking  
The chains of slavery fore'er.

.....

Soon Mindia became renowned  
In Pshav-Khevsuri; and his fame  
"With time increased, and far and wide  
Was spread the glory of his name.  
Th'illustrious Queen Tamari smiled  
In pride and blessed him from on high  
And said: "Though strong the enemy,  
His might will Mindia defy,  
And naught can crush Pshav-Khevsuri  
As long as Mindia is alive,  
For with his powers he'll overcome  
The foe however hard it strive."  
He snatched from gaping jaws of death  
The wounded, sore, nigh cleft in twain,  
Restored to health the dire diseased,  
Relieved all suffering and pain.  
And Pshav-Khevsuri's soldiers brave  
Stood ever ready for a fight.  
Thus all praised Mindia the grave,  
His wisdom and his deeds of might.

.....

'Twas early spring. The world awoke  
From hoary winter's sleep profound,  
In fields the flow'rs breathed fragrant balm,  
The hills with verdure fresh were crowned.  
The scented buds with bursting smiles  
Peeped forth through emerald and dew.  
And Mindia with throbbing heart  
Roamed mount and vale 'neath heavens blue.  
He loved to be with trees and flowers,  
With twitt'ring birds and butterflies;  
And nature, lovely as a bride,  
Saluted him with joyous cries.  
The flowers blushed like virgin maids  
As each its heart to him unveiled,  
The trees and grass with rustling swayed,  
And Mindia with gladness hailed.  
He saw them tremble as they heard  
The fondling breezes whisp'ring love,  
And hearkened to the birds as they  
Disburdened their full souls above.  
He knew the longings of their hearts,  
Their troubles, dreams and all their fears;  
Their wish to bring relief to man  
Made Mindia shed happy tears.  
He learned what root and herb distilled,  
A soothing balm, for grass and flowers  
Begged him to pluck them, and thus heal  
"Wounds by the magic of their powers.  
The songs of birds were more to him  
Than melody or sweetest sound;  
It was the language of their hearts  
That in his soul a refuge found,  
Oft Mindia, with axe in hand,  
Went to the forest for some wood,  
But as lie raised his axe, a voice  
Broke through the forest's solitude.  
In cries that shook the frightened leaves  
He heard the pleadings of the tree?  
It brought deep anguish to his heart  
And made him suffer bitterly.  
"Thou hast an axe, and strong thou art!  
Why strike me down and kill me so!"  
Strength ebbed from him, his slack hand fell,  
The axe dropped on the ground below.  
He stood bewildered as the trees  
All wept and pleaded for their lives.

Their tears seemed drops of blood to him,  
Their sighs cut through his soul like knives.  
Thus Mindia went slowly home,  
Unhappy and with troubled heart.  
He bent before the fireside low  
And raked the dying embers lest  
The fire extinguish and expire,  
Then brought some twigs and heaps of hay  
To feed the flick'ring feeble fire.  
He called together all the folk.  
"The trees feel joy and pain," said he,  
"Cut them not down! Use only twigs  
And straw for fire, I beg of ye."  
In this all thought him queer, for they  
Said: "God has made all things to be  
A blessing for the mortal man."  
None hearkened to him, and the tree  
Was cut. And to this very day  
Man fells the tree and thanks the Lord.

.....

(It was a holiday, and the Khevsuris were gathered together. They praised Mindia's wonderful powers. But Chalkhia, wished to prove to them that Mindia was an impostor and only pretended to be superhuman. He said that Mindia differed in nothing from them; that the plants and animals were created by God for man's use, and Mindia's talk was all nonsense.

Many agreed with Chalkhia. Mindia, who was sitting in their midst, paid no attention to those about him. Tears were in his eyes; no one could understand why. When asked the reason for his tears he pointed to two birds that were perched on the branch of a tree nearby. One of the birds, he said, was telling the other of the death of their little nestlings. The mother-bird was weeping.

And as the Khevsuris looked up, the bird suddenly dropped down on the ground before them dead with a broken heart. All were astounded, and those who had doubted Mindia's powers now believed in him the more. But nevertheless, they continued to hunt and cut down trees.

The enemy invaded the country many times, but thanks to Mindia victory was always on the side of the Khevsuris.

In the meantime Mindia had married. He was obliged to hunt and cut down trees in order to feed and keep his wife and children warm. And here began the tragedy of Mindia's life. He felt, as he continued in the ways of man, that he was gradually losing his wonderful powers. Nature soon spoke to him no more.

It was early morning. From Mindia's hut could be heard the voices of Mindia and his wife Mzia. He was blaming her for all the misfortunes of his life, and in bitter words expressed his regret at having married her. Mzia reminded him of how he had wooed and loved her. She tried in vain to

make him see that she and her children were not the cause of his suffering. He then confessed that he had lost his magic powers and expressed his fear for the welfare of his country.)

The world was wrapt in flimsy veil  
As from the sky poured sheeted rain;  
Down mountain sides the waters sped  
And serpent-like flowed on the plain.  
The leaves received in patters soft  
The hissing rainfall from the sky.  
Each flower beneath the raindrops shone  
Like Queen Tamari's sparkling eye.  
The sheep like gems adorned the hills,  
Sweet-scented was the air and bright;  
And hearts rejoiced as nature poured  
Abundant beauty and delight.  
Fair is the world, yet troubles kill  
All joy within the human breast.  
Countless the wretched, but man knows  
But few, and cannot see the rest.  
Dark forms of hurrying men were seen,  
From far resounded shouts and cries:  
"Where is our leader? Seek him, quick!  
Find Mindia, the ever wise!  
The bridge, o'er Arghun is destroyed  
By the advancing enemy.  
We must with courage beat them back,  
From Scythians our country free!"  
Khevsuris thronged upon the field  
Made ready for the coming fight.  
In every breast there burned a flame —  
Lore for their country's honour bright.  
Now after many years of peace  
The foe, athirst for combat new,  
Had once again besieged the land  
And Khevsuris in tumult threw.  
The Pshav-Khevsuris ready stood  
Awaiting for the morning light.  
Shields, swords and falchions like a sea  
Of flashing silver lit the night.  
Each knew that if the leader of  
The Scythians were captive made,  
'Twould free the country and the world  
Of one who like a threatening blade  
Was harbinger of tears and woe.  
The hero's name in every heart  
Would like a torch forever glow.

Brave women with their children went  
To towers where they in haste prepared  
Some food and wine in sheep-skin sacks  
With anxious hearts and loving care.

.....

Twilight its mantle gray spread o'er  
The valley, field and mountain high,  
Flow'rs drooped in prayer as evening strewed  
Her purple shadows from the sky.  
Aragvi hummed in solitude,  
The landscape faded from the sight,  
Loud voices rent the twilight's gloom  
And broke the stillness of the night.  
"Pshav-Khevsuris, unsheathe your swords!  
Crush down th'usurping enemy!  
Your threatened country needs you now,  
Fight valiantly for victory!"  
'Twas dark. No shepherd's whistling clear  
Was heard to cheer the gloomy night.  
Dark forms were seen, and things of worth  
Were hid away from human sight.  
The sheep were led to safety, then  
The folk to shelt'ring forts retired.  
All wait impatient for the dawn  
With faces set and hearts afire.

.....

On Khakhmat's sacred altar gleamed  
A candle's quiv'ring feeble light,  
Its yellow rays embraced the trees,  
Expiring there in sheer delight.  
At times the light gleamed brighter still  
And flung the shadows black aside,  
Then, like a soul in agony  
Of death, it flickered low and died.  
Enough remained of sombre light  
To see two figures on the plain;  
One held a blood-stained sword, and on  
The ground there lay a bullock slain.

#### **Berdia**

"God's blessings on thee, Mindia,  
Upon thy faith and sacrifice,  
May He thy ardent prayers receive  
And hearken to thy endless sighs.  
Thou art the comfort of our lives,

The Pshav-Khevsuris' faith and pride.  
Heaven and earth extol thy name  
With hymns that echo far and wide.  
I wonder much, my Mindia.  
To see thee here both night and day.  
What troubles thee, what hast thou done  
Thus ceaselessly to weep and pray?  
To God we owe immortal thanks,  
His praise resounds beyond the skies;  
May He forgive me, but thy ways  
Exceed all bounds of sacrifice!"

**Mindia**

"A bullock, ox, three cows have I  
As offerings to our Lord on high;  
Perhaps He'll hearken to my prayers  
And heal the wounds that make me cry."

**Berdia**

"What wounds, my man, can trouble thee,  
What pain concealed makes thee despair?  
Thou hast the power to cure all ills  
With magic herbs and cordials rare."

**Mindia**

"My tongue is tied, no words can ever  
Express why I thus anguished groan.  
'Tis easier to speak of troubles  
Endured by others than one's own.  
Does he who gold and silver hoards  
Open his purse for all to see?  
O woe! Pshav-Klievsuri is doomed,  
Condemned by destiny's decree."

**Berdia**

"Thou art our pride, our only hope,  
The idol of Khevsuri's heart.  
Thou art the favoured son of God,  
Schooled in the powers of magic art.  
When man by illness is oppressed,  
And sorrow wrings his tortured soul,  
Thy wisdom banishes his woe,  
Thy powers restore him, make him whole."

(Mindia knelt before the altar and with upraised hands pleaded to God to heed his prayers and bring him back to grace again.)

.....

Down poured the rain in hissing sheets,  
The skies frowned o'er the darkened world,  
The rumbling sound of loosened rocks

Was from the depth of midnight hurled.  
The thunder pealed, then rumbled on,  
The high winds howled as if in pain,  
The grass and flowers drooped low in fright,  
And shuddered 'neath the trampling rain.  
On Khakhmat's rock no more was seen  
The feeble gleam of candle-light.  
No more did they who weeping prayed  
Kneel there that awe-inspiring night.  
The sacred altar stood unmoved  
As winged fire in the heavens flashed.  
Below the haughty Aragvi  
Upon the cliff in fury dashed.

.....

(Women were seen in a tower praying for the welfare, of their country and their men. Mindia's wife, Mzia, was also there. She looked troubled. She confided to Sandua (a Khevsuri woman) how Mindia had changed of late. She told her of a dream she had had):

"I saw a vision in my sleep  
So turbulent and full of dread,  
That ill-forebodings fill my mind  
And o'er my heart their poison spread.  
A furious storm raged o'er the land,  
Black clouds drew down the weeping sky,  
The lightning leaped from peak to peak,  
And deaf'ning thunder rolled on high.  
I almost screamed in fear to hear  
Such groans of driving wind and rain,  
To see such bursts of blinding fire,  
Such tumult wild and hurricane.  
Confusion swelled; the sky and vale  
All seemed to mingle in a maze  
Uniting hell with earth's despair.  
But suddenly in lightning's blaze  
The mountain shook and overturned;  
The shattered trees and rocks were whirled  
Convulsively into the air,  
Then into chasms dark were hurled.  
A fiercer blast the valley shook,  
Cataracts from the skies descended;  
Upon the plain, with sullen roar,  
The waters swelled and upwards tended.  
A horrid noise was heard above  
A roar that rent the stifling air,  
Lamentings wild in dread of death

And anguished cries of great despair.  
 Shields, swords and corpses floated on  
     The surging waters of the flood;  
 And none there was to weep and mourn  
     Over the dead with tears of blood.  
 The house from where I saw this hell  
     Stood safe upon a rocky place,  
 But soon the waters curled, and lo!  
     The cliff was shattered at its base  
 And in one mass of wreck was swept  
     Away upon the rushing tide.  
 I screamed in terror as I felt  
     Myself into the waters slide.  
 Thus caught in Satan's frenzied whirl  
     I rent the air with cries for aid;  
 Pressing my children to my breast  
 "With bursting sobs to God I prayed.  
 I tried to clutch the shore, but woe,  
 It spurned my clinging, trembling hand!  
     Then o'er the faces of my babes  
     I flung a veil to hide the land  
 Where features black and blood-shot eyes  
 Of doom-wrought men I saw with fright.  
     Into the wild insurgent stream  
 They pushed me back with all their might.  
 "Tis doom to land upon this shore!  
 God's will be done!' they loudly cried,  
     'Go swiftly back before 'tis late,  
     And follow thou the rushing tide!'  
     Just then before me I beheld  
     Mindia on the waters fleet.  
 He turned to me and sadly smiled;  
 Then spoke in accents low and sweet:  
     'Forgive me if I wronged thee with  
     My bitter words, beloved mine.  
 Thou seest the Wheel of Fortune turn,  
     Yet do not weep for me nor pine.  
 Tend well our children, shield them from  
     Life's bitterness and misery.'  
 Ah me! that dream forebodeth ill.  
 Fear makes me writhe in agony."

(The Khevsuris were ready for the coming fight. They wished Mindia to lead them and did not believe him when he told them that he had lost his powers. They vowed that without his leadership they would not fight. He yielded. The place he chose for battle gave rise to apprehension and fear, but having sworn they had no way but to obey.)

Two days and nights beyond the mount  
 The battle raged in deadly swell.  
 Tigers with lions fiercely strove  
 In gaping jaws of roaring hell.  
 As gleams of steel flew dazzling o'er  
 The struggling mass upon the field,  
 Heart-rending groans and cries were heard  
 Above the clash of lance and shield.  
 Who will to death his glory yield?  
 Who'll breathe his last upon that plain?  
 Who'll find renown and victory there,  
 And freedom for his land regain?  
 Five Khevsuris with faces grim  
 Stole from the field without a sound.  
 They bore a burden o'er the mount  
 And laid it gently on the ground.  
 It was a wounded warrior,  
 A Khevsuri whose bleeding head  
 Was with a kabalakhi bound,  
 And o'er whose face death's pallor spread.

#### **The Khevsuris**

"Why rush into the jaws of death,  
 And like a madman fight in vain?  
 The truly wise and prudent chief  
 Should for his land his life retain;  
 For who can tell, the odds may turn,  
 And we may drive them back again."  
 They turned and rushed beyond the mount  
 With waving swords and hearts aflame,  
 Athirst for triumph o'er the foe  
 With deeds that claim immortal fame.  
 'Tis agony to yield to death  
 One's vital breath and God-like clay,  
 Yet better feel the pangs of death  
 Than one's own country to betray.  
 Let cowards hide their trembling frames  
 Beneath a woman's dress of shame;  
 But he who braves the foe will live  
 Immortal on the page of fame.  
 Meanwhile Mindia gnashed his teeth  
 As he lay there beneath the skies,  
 For disappointment and despair  
 Burst forth in smothered groans and cries.  
 He struggled long to free his hands  
 From bonds that cut into his flesh.

He longed for death upon the field  
Of battle, not within this mesh.  
When Mindia unloosed his hands  
And staggered to his feet again,  
Fire raged in every wound of his  
And made him wince with awful pain.  
A sudden terror froze his blood,  
He scarce believed his staring eyes,  
For he beheld the village glow  
In blazing flames that lit the skies.  
Aghast was he to see this sight.  
Cold sweat in drops o'erspread his brow.  
Hope died within his inmost heart,  
And crushed he wavered 'neath the blow.  
His stony eyes were past relief  
Of soothing 'tears'; cold anguish tied  
Him to the spot; his fingers still  
Closed on the dagger at his side;  
No prayer he dared to murmur as  
He looked up towards the crimson sky.  
A sudden flash, — then Mindia  
Sank down without a word or sigh.  
He lay upon the soft green grass;  
As if in slumber he reclined;  
Blood flowed in streams upon the ground  
And there the grass with blood was lined.  
The waning moon in sorrow gazed  
Upon the lifeless form below.  
She cast o'er him a silver veil  
And drooped her head in silent woe.  
The breeze came blowing down the steep,  
With silver moonbeams gaily played,  
Then for a moment stopped to gaze  
Upon the blood-stained deadly blade.  
It touched the unsheathed dagger's point,  
Whirled round the upturned fallen shield,  
Then flirted gaily with the grass  
And whistling danced across the field.