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**Trauma in Translation:
Review of Nino Haratischvili's *The Eighth Life (for Brilka)***

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Haratischvili, Nino. *The Eighth Life (for Brilka)*,
translated by Charlotte Collins and Ruth Martin. Scribe,
2020.

The Eighth Life (for Brilka) by Nino Haratischvili has attracted favourable attention worldwide. The 2014 German original was a bestseller and the 2018 English translation was long-listed for the International Booker Prize. Reviewers have, however, expressed uncertainty about the genre. Should it be read as a realistic historical novel like *War and Peace*? Or is it family romance with fairy-tale elements: divine but cursed hot chocolate, strange co-incidences, ghosts who comfort the bereaved?

We follow six generations of a Georgian family line, the Jashis and their friends, the Eristavis, through the tumultuous Red Century. The Jashis suffer but survive because they are *nomenclatura*; the non-conformist Eristavis do not. The narrative is largely realistic; but the magical elements are also important. They register the uncanny effects of multiple traumatic experiences in these two families. This mixture of realism and fantasy is found in much Russian literature, from Gogol to Bulgakov, and ghost stories have become prominent again since 1990 in Russia, where the victims of the Stalinist era still haunt popular consciousness. And Haratischvili has other obvious sources: German Romantic and Expressionist tales and Caucasian folk myth – used to explore the irrational drives that she sees at work in human history.

The Eighth Life also has features of fictionalized memoir with autobiographical overtones: “I owe these lines to a century that cheated and deceived everyone. I owe these lines to an enduring betrayal that settled over my family like a curse ... to my sister... to my great grandmother... to an infinite number of fallen tears...to myself, a woman who left home to find herself and gradually lost herself instead...” This plaintive voice with its elevated liturgical tone could be expressing the author’s own regret about the suffering of her forbears and her *mea culpa* about abandoning her homeland – for, like her narrator, Haratischvili left Georgia to make a new life in Germany. But the comparison ends there, as even a little knowledge about the author and her country’s history should show.

Nino Haratischvili was born in the Georgian SSR in 1983. She migrated to Germany with her parents in 1995 and is now a successful dramatist and novelist in Hamburg. Like other Soviet States, Georgia has experienced revolution, political terror and war, followed by civil war after the collapse of communism. Georgian totalitarianism had unique features, however, partly due to its early experiment with social democracy. Unlike the democratic reformists of Russia’s February 1917 Revolution, the democratic Government lasted three years in Georgia. After the Bolshevik takeover in 1921, separatists went into exile, fuelling underground dissent. And these aspirations resurfaced after 1990. Georgian democrats hoped for peaceful independence, but after civil war in 1991-93 many Georgians, like others from the former Eastern Bloc, decided to emigrate to the West.

There is no reason to think Haratischvili shares her narrator's sense of guilt. The "personal" voice we hear, testifying to family suffering, is reminiscent of the persona in memory texts. But the traumas are imagined, not pieced together from painful fragments of family memory. The autobiographical address is a literary convention here, a clever story-teller's device, well adapted to Haratischvili's novelistic purposes. It creates a sense of intimacy, allowing the narrator to draw her young "listener", Brilka (and us) close while she tells her tale of suffering under totalitarianism, from a predominantly female point of view.

In the 1930s Georgian women were particularly vulnerable to the predatory behaviour of one of the major malefactors of the Stalinist era, Lavrenti Beria. While his main task as head of the NKVD in Transcaucasia was purging rival party leaders, punishing dissenting artists and uncovering subversive plots by social democrats in exile, his sexual activities also left a trail of destruction. Known only as the Little Big Man in the book, his main victim is Christine Jashi, half-sister to Stasia, the matriarch of the Jashi line. Christine is an enchanting beauty. When Beria enters her life at a masked ball on New Year's Eve 1927, we are told: "A little door opened. It was a door beyond time and beyond fate, beyond all laws. The world of ghosts awoke for a moment, the moon took on a greenish pallor ... Confusion broke out ... but there was time enough for something black to crawl out." His desire flares, fixes on the princess and her fate is sealed.

We are suddenly in the realm of fairy-tale. Well, it's masquerade: "Witches and queens...were laughing and drinking champagne" and there is a touch of humour: "With his polished, bald head and his *pince-nez*", Beria really didn't need a costume. Haratischvili clearly intends to evoke Beria's evil presence here, but it comes across as melodramatic, even farcical. The imagery is lurid, the rhythm portentous, reminding us that as Stalin's lackey, Beria will oversee the Gulag. But in the novel we see only the cunning, ruthless seducer – the mass murderer is off-stage. This is understandable: the major perpetrators of terror have remained largely unimaginable. Haratischvili gives us the minor perpetrators instead, showing us the impact of militaristic discipline, ideological blindness and ruthless careerism – all promoted by the Soviet system – on the lives and love relationships of relatively normal characters.

Stasia Jashi's life, for example, is shaped by her marriage to a Czarist soldier who changes sides and becomes a Red Guard after the Revolution. After requisitioning food from starving peasants, he is guilt-stricken, withdraws emotionally from her and gives himself wholly to the Army. For their daughter Kitty, it is the naïve idealism of her childhood lover, the pacifist Andro Eristavi that is decisive. He is conscripted, sent to Crimea and deserts. Kitty is tortured by NKVD operatives who believe she knows Andro's whereabouts. Meanwhile, her brother, Kostya, a naval officer becomes a hero during the 900 day siege of Leningrad. He knows nothing of Kitty's ordeal and blames her for loving Andro. She is eventually forced into exile. Kostya develops into a domineering patriarch who pushes his daughter and granddaughters into rebellion and self-harm. Paternal love, patriotism and ideological cruelty are inextricably combined in his character.

Yet all the women live passionately, the desire for love and freedom linking them across the generations. The novel ends with a hymn of devotion to Brilka and Niza's fervent hope that together they can finally leave their traumatic past behind. Is this likely? Haratischvili wisely leaves her readers to decide.

It should be evident even from this brief account that the translators faced a host of difficulties: a post-modern *mélange* of genres and styles, broken chronologies, detailed descriptions of sexual violence, vicious interrogation, starvation and war. Collins and Martin have risen to the challenge admirably – carrying us quickly and competently through this immensely complicated family narrative and vividly recreating the voice of a gifted storyteller from whom we hope to hear much more.