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# Bulgarian and Georgian Fictional Geographies and Coastscapes as Bridges for a Comparative Black Sea Literature

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The article drafts the notions of a spiritual-material landscape and of a coastscape amidst correlative notions like spiritualized material landscape, seascape, geography and cosmography. Against this theoretical context, it picks up a pair of literary works, one Bulgarian and one Georgian, that (re)shape regional marine imaginary on the levels of geography and of land-/sea-/coastscapes. It shows how they, in various degrees, model regional geography in the vein of alternative history. Both works are shown to "Levantinise" the life-worlds of their respective nations of extratextual origin, within a moderate move towards self-inclusion into a wider world and "westernisation". The analysis of the pair charts a macroscopic typology and presupposes a history of alternative fictional geo-history and of metaliterature across the region. The comparison conveys a shared hesitation between a will for "archipelagic" experiencing of sea and for "thalassic" one.

**KEYWORDS:** Penčo Slavejkov; Aka Morčiladze; alternative geographies; coastscapes; metaliterature



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## 1. In lieu of introduction: Spiritual-material sea and coastscapes

Spiritual landscape is a spiritual reality, reflected/constructed (non) mimetically; not a material landscape invested with spiritual meaning. It can be prior to material landscapes, in shaping human perception of one or another of them so that they could host or embody a spiritual one<sup>1</sup>. Spiritual landscape thus conceived recalls the divide between spiritual and material realities, and leaves on the hind the one between constructed and pre-given ones, which has been the topical one in social sciences and humanities<sup>2</sup> in the last fifty years.

Landscapes conceived by certain traditions as (simply) spiritual are conceived in others as subtly material or “prior to the material–spiritual divide” (as the resurrected righteous in Heaven and Edenic breeze in Syriac tradition (Averincev, 1999, 108–109)). I would consider them spiritual-material.

Let us assume that a landscape is a perceivable/imaginable spatial structure larger in scale than man (hence not a signified of prosopography = a portrait), and smaller than “Abrahamic” God (hence not a signified of cosmography). A geography (incl. “thalassography”) would be wider than landscape and narrower than cosmography.

A “seascape” and a “coastscape” are conceptualised by analogy.

In what follows, I would compare fictional geographies and coastscapes from two literatures which are geographic neighbours but almost never met intertextually<sup>3</sup> and were almost never compared<sup>4</sup>: the Bulgarian and the Georgian one.

I will explore the potential of these fictional geographies and coastscapes to support a cross-Pontic comparative literature. Such scholarship

1 Spiritual landscape thus conceived could be identified with what Alexej Lidov would call a “hierophanic” spatial structure that induces “hierotopy” (construction of sacred spaces), see (Lidov, 2009, 9–10).

2 The interface of literary studies and geography included, as visible in the summarising work of Sheila Hones (2022, 24–25, 28–29, 31 etc.) and elsewhere.

3 They were occasional in the epoch of “friendship between socialist nations,” in our case the 1960s–1980s, and extremely rare and minimalist before the 1950s (occasional translations of isolated poems).

4 Exceptions known to me are: Bizadse, 1987; Liutskanov, 2022–2023.

would first try to detect commonalities and contrasts between the mentioned literatures, implying (but also exploring the grounds for such an implication) their shared belonging to a “muted”<sup>5</sup> or simply “frozen” interliterary community, rather than to a casual multitude, created ad hoc by scholarly speculation.

I would try here one possible approach to coastscapes, bringing forth a suitable pair of examples. I shall address a book-scale modeling of an alternative geography(-and-history): in the *On the Isle of the Blessed* by Penčo Slavejkov (1910) and in *Santa Esperansa* by Aka Morčila-dze<sup>6</sup> (2004).<sup>7</sup>

This pair of works invites for a macroscopic typological comparison. It keeps the door open for tripartite (re)constructions that would continue “populating” the Pontic interliterary-space-in-the-making, provide outlets for converging typology and contactology, and extract from the shared habitat a general plot (an intercultural myth). Such triangulations would add, most evidently, Vasilij Aksjonov’s *Island of Crimea*.<sup>8</sup>

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5 As “muted groups” in social anthropology.

6 Georgian personal names in the text shall be transcribed according to a grossly simplified ISO 9984 standard, while Georgian-language references shall be transliterated accurately after it (with a minor deviation:  $\mathfrak{z}$  from the Trubeckoj-Vogt standard shall be introduced for  $\mathfrak{d}$  [dz] instead of j, to avoid easy confusion with j reflecting Cyrillic  $\mathfrak{j}$  [i] and other confusions). Transliteration shall reflect the lack of capital letters in contemporary Georgian orthography.

7 (The first book can be read only in its original language.) The second book has been published in German and Turkish translations, and Bulgarian and English ones are in progress. .

8 Recently, Eyüp Özveren (2023) offered an insightful comparison between *The island of Crimea* (the English-language version) and *Santa Esperansa* (in Turkish translation). – Alternatively, the pair could be appended with the ambiguous (stylisation of) an archival research by Maria Lipiskova *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius or the Hidden Archive of the Library of the Isle of Blessed* (2004).

## 2. A book-scale modelling of alternative geography: Penčo Slavejkov's *On the Isle of the Blessed* – Aka Morčiladze's *Santa Esperansa*

Black Sea has apparently been a source of anxiety for its lack of considerable islands. Imagination, supported either by frequent recourse of memory to other kind of seas or by traditions of hyperbole and allegory, has been able to mitigate anxiety through recreation (now allusive and then allegoric).

### 2.1. General composition of the books

The “**inner** shape”<sup>9</sup> of the novel *Santa Esperansa* is one of a set of playing cards, more properly: a sequence of fanciful ekphrases of these playing cards. The cards themselves are penned as frontispieces to the chapters called “notebooks” – one drawing per chapter’s beginning (Morčiladze, 2017, 31, 51, 71, etc.). The book hosts four bigger parts (each consisting of nine chapters), and an introduction by a figure oscillating between a fictional narrator and the biographical author. This inner shape erodes the temporal sequentiality which is normal in fiction. Similarly, the anthological form which allots the poems of a poet to various fictional poets, as is the case in *On the Isle of the Blessed*, undermines the linearity of reading implied by a “book of poems” by a singular author. *Santa Esperansa* to a greater extent and *On the Isle of the Blessed* to a lesser one instruct to be read spatially. To cite the introduction to *Santa Esperansa*, “it is quite not obligatory to read all the notebooks from the beginning to the end one by one. If some story from the contents list hereby interests you, you are free to choose the corresponding notebooks” (2017, 25). Moreover, *Santa Esperansa* instructs to be read visually, as some concretisation of spatial reading (as already hinted at). Less clearly, *On the Isle of the Blessed* instructs to

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<sup>9</sup> The term has a long history in European linguistics and aesthetics (Leopold, 1929). It was employed in Russian literary studies in the last century, with or without reference to A. Potebnja. I would understand it thus: “an inscribed generic form manipulating the understanding of the inscribing one in the latter’s entirety”.

make a virtual round trip, as if inspecting a sculpture walking around it in order to grasp all its facets and how they built the whole, in accordance with the preconception that fictional poets from the anthology embody **aspects** of the “poetic genius” of the fictional country<sup>10</sup> and **facets** of the non-fictional poet who created it<sup>11</sup>. Such a “trip,” or an illusion of it on behalf of the implicit reader, can be activated by subconscious “naïve” reduction of an island to a round object; and by the series of small graphical portraits at the start of each section, some of which resemble graphic reproductions of busts in the round and others engravings, but all of which, unlike images in *Santa Esperansa*, convey a counter-medieval texture featuring illusionistic figures against either illusionistic airy space or blank ground.

### 2.2. The location of the isle and of the archipelago

It is not clear in which sea, or seas, the *Isle of the Blessed* is located. There is one single anchor in the coastal and maritime geography of the book: a mount Olympus observable from a tower across a strait.<sup>12</sup> However, the reader does not know whether the two terrestrial objects are parts of the “Isle” or not. No unambiguous instructions are received on that matter.

The archipelago of Saint Hope has a clear geographic position; the third Georgian edition of the book (Morč'ilaže, 2017, 35) contains a Black Sea map featuring the archipelago. However, when one reads the novel, he realises that the ties of the archipelago with its geographical vicinities are blurred, or that the vicinities are hardly existent. The inhabitants of the archipelago have some ties and exchanges with Istanbul (mentioned 29 times), Crimea (in the past; beside Genoese Caffa, Feodosia

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10 Apparent; hinted at in the mystifying introduction (Slavejkov, 1958, 6) and explicitly stated in the scholarly commentary (343).

11 A common-sense truth, supported on several occasions by the 1958 more or less academic commentary, and already slyly admitted by the declared anthologist in the penultimate sentence of the Introduction (Slavejkov, 1958, 7).

12 In the very beginning of the anthology – in the poem *In the Tower by the Sea* ascribed to “Bore Vihor” (Slavejkov, 1958, 11). The easy association is with Olympus in Thessaly viewed from Thessaloniki; Olympus in Bithynia (hyperbolically) seen from the “Seven Towers” prison of Istanbul is also an option.

is the sole mentioned place, and only once, on p. 343)<sup>13</sup>, and some unspecified places on the Georgian littoral; but the coastal cities which are geographically closest to the archipelago – Trabzon, Sochi and Samsun, and also the absent from the map Bichvinta-Pitsunda and Gagra – are virtually non-existent in the novel, almost the same being with the a bit less closer Sinop, Dioscuria-Sukhumi, Poti and Batumi. (Trabzon/Trapizon is mentioned three times in the introduction to the novel, which deliberately fuses the standpoints of the biographical author and the narrator; and only once in the novel, on p. 580. Batumi and Poti – once, on p. 581. The whole passage in the novel containing these three names is both superficial and redundant in mentioning them. Batumi is mentioned two more times, on p. 343. Sinop is mentioned once, on p. 743).

### 2.3. Unpremeditated effects of confronting non-fictional geography

Upon acquaintance with geographical scholarship from earlier centuries, both fictional worlds re-appear as (at once self-content and self-sarcastic) gazes into the respective national navels. If we look for geographical prototypes of the Isle and the archipelago, then the Snake / Achilles Island<sup>14</sup> offshore the delta of Danube looms large, on the one hand; and some mythic islands near the mouth of Rioni (Phasis) mentioned by Arabic and Persian sources<sup>15</sup>, on the other hand. As if these

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13 The name of Crimea itself is mentioned only once in the novel, in the phrase “Café Crimea” (Morč’ila3e, 2017, 127). The English word with Georgian letters “crimson” – four times (441–442, 626).

14 A trace of such genesis is detectable in the sequence of five poems in the spatial-temporal centre of the book: these are the penultimate and last poems by the ninth poet in a cast of nineteen (*On the Other Shore* and *A Withheld Toast* by Stamen Rosita) and the first, second and third poems by the tenth (*Ecstasy, Hero* and *The Sick Monk* by Čevdar Podrumče) (Slavejkov, 1958, 99–111). In them, a sequence of motifs potentially reminiscent of Achilles’ afterlife according to *Aethiopsis* appear: the motifs of passage into Otherworld, of fire, of apotheosis, of “short heroic life vs. prolonged inactivity on earth,” and of a travel across and anchoring in a sea are present. “Hero” contains a description of Achilles, but does not mention his name.

15 Commenting on the Persian 10th-c. geography *Ḥudūd al-‘Ālam*, its translator into Russian and an editor of its Russian and English editions Vladimir Minorsky wrote: “Still more amazing is the representation of the Gurz as living ‘on small islands,’ whereas there are no islands in the eastern part of the Black Sea” (*Ḥudūd*

non-fictional islands have been inspected through a magnifying glass, with the implicit author taking the role of an invisible Gulliver in the land of some Levantine Lilliputians. Within such perspective, the two books can be read as unpremeditated (auto)parodies/travesties: of the moderately self-content yet westernising national projects and the respective writers as their promoters.

#### 2.4. Manipulation of ethnic cast (preliminary notes)

At first sight, each ethnos in *Santa Esperansa* tends to be assigned an exclusive macro-societal role: rulers (British), traders (Genoese), soldiers (*Osmanlı*<sup>16</sup>, but also a specific group of Georgians, the “Sungalis”), peasants (Georgians). The British would be the holders of the “referential” discourse, Italians and Turks of the “vehicular,” and Georgians of the “vernacular,” while the “mythic” one would be partitioned along confessional lines (on this macrosociolinguistic tetrachotomy (Gobard, 1976 34–38)). On second view, however, authoritative positions within each discourse are seen to be contested: e.g., military service between Georgians, *Osmanlı* and Genoese (2017, 40). Correlation between the four ethnoses and the suits of the emblematic Esperansian set of playing cards is quite probable.

Morčiladze picked up representatives of the Levantine ethnic cast which would look more prestigious in the eyes of westward-looking Georgians (British, Italians, Turks) and marginalised to virtually erased the presence of less such (Greeks, Armenians). The historical habituses

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*al-Ālam*, 1970, 422). Here Minorsky adds this footnote: “By some mistake Idrisi, ii, 396, mentions an island [...] on the way between Taman (on the Azov Sea) and Trebizond. Const. Porph., De adm. Imp., ch. 42, mentions an island near Tamatarkha (evidently a part of the Taman peninsula) and several islands off the coast of *Zikhia* (Circassia), near the estuary of the Kuban [...]”. “GURZ (Georgia?) is also a province of Rum; most of its (population) live on small islands. By (?) the sea of Gurz they have a land (shahr) called Gurz which lies in Rum on the coast of the said sea”. (*Hudūd al-Ālam*, 1970, 157). This text and passage in all likelihood was familiar to Morčiladze, as a historian by education. This source contains the probably sole “Oriental” designation of Black Sea as Georgian Sea, so it must have been included in the reference lists in (late) Soviet Georgian universities.

16 In the sense of a quasi-nation.

which were geographically the closest to the imagined location of Santa Esperansa and which were themselves kinds of semi-islands (not peninsulas!) with their relative autonomy vis-à-vis the adjacent large landmasses of the former Scythian steppe and of the Armenian plateau – namely, (Southern) Crimea (Mutafian, 2018, 45–76) and late Byzantine but also Ottoman Pontus (Hewsen, 2009; Dédéyan, 2022–2023) – were inhabited by considerable numbers of immigrant Armenians who lived in symbiosis with the Genoese.<sup>17</sup>

Slavejkov nearly eliminated presence of Greek, Albanian, Serbian and Romanian neighbours: hence a Bulgarian island with traces of Ottomans and links to Italy was carved. Functions in the cast present on the *Isle of the Blessed* are less distinct.

### 2.5. The two books as negative mirrors of their non-fictional countries of origin

The archipelago of Saint Hope is a negative copy of historical Georgia in several respects. The eastern coast of Black Sea takes the role of an enormous negative mirror, with some capacity for throughput of material objects (almost exclusively, sons- and daughters-in-law for the islander Georgian clan of Visramianis (Morč'ilaze, 2017, 216–219)). I will list the conspicuous negative coincidences. Saint Hope is maritime, geographically triple (three islands), ethnically quadruple (Georgian-Genoese-Ottoman-British) and one political territory (Morč'ilaze, 2017, 40), while historical Georgia is mainly inland and multiple politically-territorially (sub-polities or fiefs after the fragmentation of the 15th c. swing about four)<sup>18</sup>. Georgianness in Saint Hope is carried on alongside, and within (Morč'ilaze, 2017, 34–35), a Genoese-Ottoman *convivencia* based on shared interest in slave trade (35); in historical

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17 This is not to deny the far more substantial presence of Kartvelians (esp. Lazes) in the Pontus, esp. eastern and rural, by the 17th c. and beyond (Hewsen, 2009, 48; Bryer, 1970, 42), and of Greeks (majority till ca. the 17th c.: Bryer, 1970, 37–43). It seems that the neo-classicist matrix of Morč'iladze's novel, putting ethnicities into social classes, put them into religious ones too and left no room for contenders in the niche of "Eastern Christians".

18 All generalisations referring to Georgian history in this section of the article can be traced to the work of Donald Rayfield (2015).



Georgia it survived on the bloody edge of Persian-Ottoman rivalry. Saint Hope was peacefully colonised and was to be peacefully left by the greatest marine power, Britain (Morčičlaze, 2017, 39). Historical Georgia was colonised (1800s–1820s) and then abandoned (1917–1918) and then reconquered (1921) by the greatest terrestrial power, Russia. The fictional coloniser came from the West, the historical one from the North.

*On the Isle of the Blessed* too is a negative mirror. Yet not of a “country per se,” but of a “country-in-other-country’s-eyes,” or, more properly: of a “country-as-receiving-another-country’s-poetry”. While Morčičlaze thematised a country, Slavejkov had thematised a country’s interliterary communication. There is an important shade in Slavejkov’s thematisation: he explores a country’s readership’s ability to perceive the unknown. The introduction to the mystified anthology starts with these two sentences:

Six years ago I printed in English (...) [an anthology of] the Bulgarian folk songs – *The Shadow of the Balkans*, London, 1904, – which enjoyed in England innumerable benevolent responses and on which no one’s voice from no corner [the Turkish word *kjoše* is used] of our country was heard of. And (as you see) now I am printing an anthology of songs and poems from a foreign poetry, the mere existence of which is barely heard of [in our country], [just] as [the existence of] our songs by the Englishmen (Slavejkov, 1958, 5).

#### **2.6. Levantinisation: Savouring fragments of Pax Ottomanica and introducing Italian(ate) features**

Both (implied) authors preserve and savour fragments of (post)Ottoman timespace and both tend to “Italianise” their respective national chronotopes: the one through allegories and allusions appropriate to early modernism, the other through the kind of materialisation made possible by surrealism and established after the literary discovery of alternative history<sup>19</sup>.

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19 Prominent specimens of literary alternative history within Morčičlaze’s sight may have been Aksjonov’s *Ostrov Krym* and Milorad Pavić’s *Dictionary*

**The Italian air** on the Isle of the Blessed is conveyed already in the biography of the first fictional poet, Bore Vihor. He was born in “Artanja”; his mother was from the isle of Chios; he entered politics when just twenty years old, as a head of non-successful conspiracy against the ruler of the Isle, a prince named *Selvini*; he escaped prison to go to Sicily; he perished for the liberation of Rome as fighter under Garibaldi (Slavejkov, 1958, 10). (The toponym *Artanja* is normally considered an anagram for Jantra, a “real” river crossing the “real” birthplace of Slavejkov’s father; or a near-anagram for Trjavna, a historical town in the same region of Bulgaria; however, it can be linked Artanuži, a toponym from historical south-western Georgia, and to Artvin(i), a modern town in the same region which was captured by the Russian Empire during the 1877–1878 Russian-Ottoman war and had then mixed Georgian-Armenian-Turkic population. Yet both, especially the former one, are not likely to be known to Slavejkov. On the other hand, *Artanja* sounds like a Spanish word, imagine an *Artaña*)<sup>20</sup>. As a result, the Isle of the Blessed cannot be identified with any insular or quasi-insular space in the Mediterranean but carries a Mediterranean air. The portrait of another fictional poet, Velko Meruda, bears different kind of Italianisation: a substantial part of his verses are announced an imitation of Italian specimens yet denied any cognition of extratextual Italy (Slavejkov, 1958, 42). Saint Hope is Italianised far more conspicuously: descendants of Genoese from Crimea are one of the four major ethnic groups (and holders of power) on the archipelago (Morč’ilaze, 2017, 50 etc.), and one of them (Sandro da Costa) is among the protagonists of the novel.

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*of the Khazars* (2000 Russian edition is available in the national library of Georgia, the first Georgian is from 2006). Thanks to Vitaly Chernetsky for the second guess.

20 A swing of Slavejkov’s creative attention eastwards was a fact – in the first edition of the anthology, he included the vita and works by a poet and intellectual who migrated from the Isle to Tehran, to die there, despite an amnesty to political dissenters announced in the meanwhile (Slavejkov, 1958, 258–259, 343–344). So noticing and reimagining objects from the eastern sector of the Russian-Ottoman contact zone like Artvin – by the writer whose father, and he himself, belonged to the zone’s western sector – is not impossible. According to the logic of a mirroring, whose invisible axis passed through Istanbul (or maybe Thessaloniki?) an Artanja mirroring Artvin would be flanked by Vienna or Paris mirroring Tehran.

**Ottoman timespace** is vivified and savoured on and about the Isle as follows. The commentator in the academic edition of Slavejkov's work bluntly identifies the place-action in the anthology's first poem with the Iedi Kule prison in late Ottoman Salonika (Slavejkov, 1958, 258). Another poem by the same fictional poet Bore Vihor, *Bačo Kiro* (Slavejkov, 1958, 13–14), reflects some of the tensions of the epoch of Tanzimat (1839–1876), most notably, the deliberation whether armed resistance of Christians against the Sultan is worth maintaining, if they have been granted political rights. The title of the sole work by another fictional poet, Spiro Godina (a possible translation: *Spiridon the Lasting*<sup>21</sup>)<sup>22</sup>, is *Amaneti* (Slavejkov, 1958, 262). According to the scholarly commentary to the poem, *amaneti* is “a Turkish word of Arabic origin,” meaning “something entrusted for custody, an antiquity,” but also, by association, “a message, a short piece of verses” (294). The word apparently can be traced to late Ottoman Turkish *emānèt* – meaning “anything placed in trust, either to be returned to the giver, or to be given to a third party; an office of trust under government, and conducted on government account, not on farm” (Redhouse, Wells, 1880, 424). The form with “a-” is given priority in the late 19th-c. explanatory dictionary of Bulgarian by Najden Gerov (1895, 9): “(…) T[urkish] *emanet*: 1) something given to someone to be kept (...); 2) (...) sent from one place to another (...); 3) custody (...) hostage”. The late 19th c. explanatory dictionary of Georgian by Davit Ćubinašvili (1984 [1884], 22) contains the word *amanat'i*, indicating its Arabic origin and a meaning of “custody” and “hostage”. The combination of Turkish suffix “-et-” and Slavonic “-i” (inflection for plural) may be perceived as the Italianate (hypothetically also Georgian) “-eti”. This hypothetic Turkish-Arabic(-Italian)-Slavonic macaronic word can emblematisé Ottoman Levant. As for its particular contextualised meaning,

21 This fictional surname is profoundly ambiguous, if we take the word *godina* in the sense of “year”: it might imply short duration (if juxtaposed to “eternity”) or a long one (if compared to “day,” as in the proverb *ден година храни*). A less apparent solution would be “right time (for sth)”. Ignoring the apparent meaning of *godina* and examining the form against word-formation patterns (cf. *Тучна*) would bring better readings.

22 The profile of this writer recalls Lev Tolstoj of Tolstoism, his name – the image of both a year-round drunkard and of Holy Spirit.

it might signify “poetic pieces securing one’s place in eternity / signifying one’s captivity on earth”. Had the fictional Spiro Godina been a writer in the Byzantine tradition, his work would have been titled *Apophtegms / Apothegms*. To contemporaries of Slavejkov, *amaneti* sounded more familiar than to his later readers. Likelier readers of lives of saints than 1950s scholars and us may have vaguely remembered that St. Spiridon was a bishop on Cyprus, that he performed wonders there, in Constantinople and Antioch, and that his relics rested in Constantinople and finally on Corfu (where he miraculously helped the Venetians repel the Ottoman siege in 1716); the trajectory of his body charted a space posteriorly called “Levant”.<sup>23</sup>

Ottoman timespace is vivified in *Santa Esperansa* by repeated acknowledgement that Ottoman rule is part of the archipelago’s past and by narrative retrospections into it (Morčiladze, 2017, 199–202, etc.); while it is savoured through a puzzling story about a former Ottoman governor’s water pipe (*nargile*), pieces of which are kept and sought after like the relics of a Christian saint (44–48, 137–140, etc.).

In both works “Italianateness” ties to the West. But “Ottomanisation” serves contrasting geo-locational purposes. In the Bulgarian work, it is a kind of a rope helping to anchor the island in the Levant. In the Georgian one, it helps cut ties with a more eastern agent, Persia.

Authorial motives behind resultant “Levantinisation” deserve separate inquiry. I guess that Morčiladze was anticipatively inclined to postmodern neoliberal commoditisation of cultural diversity and hybridisation (on it: Öncü, 2010; Mavelli, 2018). While with Slavejkov Levantinisation served a cultural strategy of equidistant polycentrism (his balancing between several foreign, but most notably the German and the Russian, centres of gravity was explored by Nikola Georgiev (2000)).

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23 The biography of Penčo’s father – Petko Slavejkov, a compiler of several printed brief *Menologia* in the 1870s, – by Boris Jocov (1929) gives enough reasons to think that Penčo could have domesticated himself within post-Byzantine literacy in no lesser degree than into modern German and Russian literatures.

### 2.7. Core coastscapes of the books

In *On the Isle of the Blessed*, the lyrical “I” of the first poem of the anthology would stay locked in a tower and watch Mt Olympus across a strait (Slavejkov, 1958, 11): for several reasons, among which its macro-compositional prominence, this is the core *coastscape* of the book. In a poem in the middle of the graphic space of the book the sight of a “choir” of stars that are like boats at a seashore prepare the lyrical eye to experience the elevating breeze of God (Slavejkov, 1958, 108–109). I would call this setting, where the arch of nightly sky and the sea are identified to each other, the core *seascape* of the book. The first “scape” implies an archipelagic experience of sea (which is craved for as a bridge) and the second one is ambivalent (a craving for it as for a milieu of solitude even prevails).

In *Santa Esperansa* some lonely women would sit at the seaside and weep or sing without words in choir with the sea waves, causing fallings in love or psychic disorder in males on the main island – a kind of sirens addressing not sailors but earth-dwellers; during the British rule they would be relocated to a limited number of indoor clubs, where they would be transformed into a kind of duets with one of the voices imitating the sound of the sea (Morčilaze, 2017, 84–90). This coastal soundscape is hard to find in the expanse of the book’s 766 pages, but a posteriori we may recognise the half-English title of the subchapter introducing it as a signal. The enclosure of female “sorrowers” (*modardeebi*) indoors signifies a will for isolation from the sea, which transforms a sea despite its physical profile into a repelling “gap,” not “bridge”.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Conclusion: The case within the intention for Black Sea comparative literature

The preliminary analysis of the two composite works (*On the Isle of the Blessed* and *Santa Esperansa*) showed a drive towards moderate

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24. Considering the ancient Greek notion of the radical difference of Black Sea from the Mediterranean and the related use of several terms for “sea” in ancient Greek, as analysed by Anca Dan (2008), would elaborate the dichotomy.

“de-Ruritanisation”<sup>25</sup> = “Westernisation” through moderate “Levan-tinisation”. Now I can suggest that the figure of island(s) was chosen as the spatial milieu for the process by both authors for its ambivalence: relatively “closed,” but “opening” the rural hinterland, and inevitably exposed to overseas comings and goings; its semantics oscillating between warning and relief. While Slavejkov apparently transferred to the Black Sea archipelagic patterns from his own life-world and mental geography in which the Aegean had been prominent<sup>26</sup>, Morčiladze re-invented the priorly islandless Eastern Pontic basin projecting Southern Crimea and Pontus onto his fictional archipelago. As briefly argued by me, both imagined chronotopes may have had backing in ancient or medieval historical-geographical accounts. As indicated, both works show a “classisying” stance, based, respectively, on centrality of mimetic (illusionist) anthropocentrism and on taming of heterogeneity within a limited range of specimens/types. The nationalist foothold of that stance has not been explored by me. I believe the comparison is vital for (re)constructing of a Black Sea interliterary space<sup>27</sup> and an initiation of a Black Sea comparative literature, for two reasons: 1) it

25 In the sense implied by “Ruritania” of Vesna Goldsworthy (1998).

26 In order to assess the non-apparent significance of the Aegean for Penčo, one has to interpret in combination these givens: 1) one of the marine works of his father, Petko, was an adaptation of a German work about navigation from Morea to Cythera titled *The First Seafarer* (1855) (Nikolov 2009b); 2) Aegean was one of the thresholds into “the outside” for Bulgarian nation in Bulgarian collective imaginary, as reflected, for example, in Penčo’s own lyrical-satirical prefiguration of *On the Isle of the Blessed* *Онак край* (A *froward/upside-down corner=country*), but it was more an object of craving rather than a given (hence a “window” rather than a “door”) even after the Liberation of 1878 (Ivan Vazov’s *Пред Бялото море*, *In Front of the White [=Aegean] Sea* is indicative) (more examples in: Vasilev, 1928); 3) Slavejkov has adopted the image of crossing (a strait on a boat) to reach ‘the other shore’ as an allegory of overcoming physical and intellectual disability and of naturalist aesthetics; 4) he lived in the time of armed struggle of Bulgarians in Macedonia against Ottoman power and Greek and Serbian rivals for the territory which included Salonika; 5) his reinterpretation of ancient Greek literary and mythological works and motives was in the vein of early modernism.

27 Reconstructing of a BS interliterary space or of a BS *collocation* of literatures *transformable-into-a-space* through prospective efforts of scholars, critics and translators.

discerns a possible starting and a late points for a history of regional (quasi)metaliterature; 2) it discerns analogical points in the literary use of Black Sea aimed at geo-historical self-dis-/relocation. Poetics-centred comparisons between the two works should count for (and trial) the distinction between modernist, “paramodernist” and postmodernist fiction, in terms of “evacuation/occupation” of “the ‘interspace’ between narrational space (discourse) and narratival space (world)” (R.R., 1985, 564) by the implicit author as proposed by Carl Malmgren (1985).

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