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by John Climacus in Shota Rustaveli's  
*The Man in the Panther's Skin****

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**The Trace of *The ladder of Divine Ascend* by John Climacus in  
Shota Rustaveli's *The Man in the Panther's Skin***

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**Abstract**

*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus is one of the most important works for Georgian and European Medieval culture, which influences on the literature of later period. Within this article we discuss the influence of *The Ladder* on the most important Georgian original work of Medieval centuries, Shota Rustaveli's *The Man in the Panter's skin*, as well as is being presented an overview of existing theories in ancient philosophical systems of spiritual anthropology and the problem of soul and body interaction.

**KeyWords:** *John Climacus, Shota Rustaveli, The Man in the Panter's skin, The [Ladder of Divine Ascent](#)*

Relation between soul and body was one of the main problems highly discussed by almost all philosophical movements, as well as by various religious systems. It was very important problem for both various ancient philosophical systems and theological works. The article below will focus on different opinions and theories appeared in Philosophical and Theological works. Relation between two very interesting medieval texts *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus and *The Man in the Panther's Skin* by Shota Rustaveli.<sup>1</sup> Is being discussed in this context. Before revealing how this problem has been reflected in literary texts, we will present a brief overview of existing theories in ancient philosophical systems of spiritual anthropology as well as the problem of soul and body interaction.

The Homeric poems use the word 'soul' in two distinguishable ways. The soul is, on one hand, something that a human being risks in a battle and loses in death. On the other hand, it is what at the time of death departs from the person's limbs and travels to the underworld, while Homer spoke of soul only in the case of human beings, in sixth and fifth century usage soul is attributed to every kind of living thing. By the end of the fifth century, pleasure taken in food and drink, as well as sexual desire was attributed to the soul (5: pp. 73-85.), as well as feelings like love and hate, joy and grief, anger and shame are associated with the soul. In non-philosophical Greek of the fifth century, the soul is treated as the bearer of moral qualities, such as, for instance, temperance and justice and also as responsible for practical thought and cognition. (4: pp. 235-59).

As a result of these developments, the language made available something that Homeric Greek lacked, a distinction between body and soul. Heraclitus (fl. around 500 BC) attributes wisdom to the soul. He may have been the first thinker to articulate a connection between soul and motor functions. He says that the drunken person stumbles because his perceptual abilities have been impaired, and this impairment is due to moistness of soul (9: p. 22). Like many (or indeed all) sixth and fifth century thinkers who expressed views on the nature or constitution of the soul, Heraclitus thought that the soul was bodily, but composed of an unusually fine or rare kind of matter, e.g. air or fire. (2: pp. 488-95) The prevalence of the idea that the soul is bodily explains the absence of problems about the relation between soul and body. Soul and body were not thought to be radically different in kind.

According to Plato, spirit is cognitive and intellectual. The soul in the *Phaedo* is not responsible, or *directly* responsible, for all of a person's mental

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<sup>1</sup>Shota Rustaveli's *The man in the panther skin* is a Georgian epic of 12-13<sup>th</sup> century. It constitutes a natural development and completion of the centuries-old Georgian Christian religious, philosophical and literary thought. Oriental and western cultural and world view trends found reflection in it on national ground: Classical Greek, particularly Neoplatonic and Aristotelian, philosophical elements, popular in 12-13<sup>th</sup> centuries intellectual circles, were introduced into the Christian religious ideology. In the history of world civilization, the phenomenon of Rustaveli's *The man in the panther skin* corresponds to the developmental stage of Christian thought in West-European Late Middle ages. The world-view problems of the poem are those of the Late Middle Ages, while Rustaveli's solution of these problems comes close to Renaissance thinking.

or psychological activities and responses, but only for a rather severely limited subset of them. Socrates attributes a large variety of mental states (etc.) not to the soul, but to the (animate) body, such as, for instance, beliefs and pleasures (6: 83d), and desires and fears (6: 94d). At the same time, the soul is not narrowly intellectual: it too has desires (6: 81d), even passionate ones (such as the nonphilosophical soul's love [*erôs*] of the corporeal, (6: 80b), and pleasures as well, such as the pleasures of learning (6: 114e). Moreover, the soul's functions are not restricted to grasping and appreciating truth, but prominently include regulating and controlling the body and its affections (such as beliefs and pleasures, desires and fears) especially if it is the wise soul.

Aristotle's theory of soul is presented primarily in the *De Anima*. According to it, all of the vital functions of all animate organisms are related to the soul. The relation between soul and body, on Aristotle's view, is also an instance of the more general relation between form and matter: thus an ensouled, living body is a particular kind of in-formed matter (3: 2.2, 413a32; 2.3, 415a9). Aristotle agrees with the *Phaedo*'s claim that souls are very different from bodies. Moreover, Aristotle seems to think that all the abilities that are constitutive of the souls of plants, beasts and humans are such that their exercise involves and requires bodily parts and organs. Contrary to the Platonic position, Aristotle states that even human souls are not capable of existence and (perhaps as importantly) activity apart from the body (3: 1.1, 403a3-25, esp. 5-16). Ancient theories about the Soul (especially the Aristotle's and Plato's Theories) do not lose importance in other periods. Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa were heavily indebted to philosophical theories of soul, especially Platonic ones, but also introduced new concerns and interests of their own.

Therefore, interpretation of postclassical development of this particular problem should be done in the framework and context of classical theories (see 1).

As we have seen, this issue has been significant for both theological and philosophical thought within the centuries. Two important medieval works - John Climacus' "*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*" and Shota Rustaveli's "*The Man in the Panther's Skin*" are interesting in this regard.

One of the main aspects of research in Rustvelological studies is to identify the sources of the poem - *The Knight in the Panther Skin*. The importance of the text written by John Climacus for Georgian and European spiritual culture should be noticed.<sup>1</sup> *The Ladder* was identified as important as *Ten Commandments* and for his spiritual height, St. John was himself regarded as a *newly-appeared Moses* (12).

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<sup>1</sup>As it is known, Russian classical writers of 19<sup>th</sup> century were referring to John Climacus's work in their poems and novels. Fyodor Dostoevsky was permanently carrying *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* and was writing down phrases from the latter and as it is known he used it in *The Brothers Karamazov*. There is a prototype of Akaki by the same name in Nikolai Gogol's novel *Overcoat*. <11: <http://www.pravenc.ru/text/471351.html>>

According to such assessment of John Climacus' text as well as diversity of Georgian translations<sup>1</sup>, we suppose that one particular passage from the text is the source of Rustaveli's phrase "falsehood and two-facedness injure the body and then the soul" (10: st.770). *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* contains 31 steps as an analogy of the Christ's age. Each step contains single virtue or single vice. Obtaining or overcoming those virtues or vices, a human heightens to the God through the spiritual ladder. Possible source of Rustaveli's phrase that is interesting for us, is placed in the following step: *On incorruptible purity and chastity to which the corruptible attain by toil and sweat*, where we read: "some passions pass to the body from the soul, and some do the opposite. The latter happens to people living in the world, but the former to those living the monastic life, because of the lack of outward stimulus" (7: step 15).

The similar idea is developed by John Climacus in the chapter dedicated to fear *On unmanly and puerile cowardice*: "sometimes the soul, and sometimes the flesh, turns coward first, and the one passes its infirmity on to the other. If this untimely fear does not pass into the soul when the flesh flinches, then deliverance from the disease is at hand. But the actual freedom from cowardice comes when we eagerly accept all unexpected events with a contrite heart" (7: step 21).

As it is given in the text of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, vice envelopes body if we are referring to secular person, whereas when we are talking about the monk it consumes the soul first of all. Avtandil, who is King Rostevan's vizier, states the following phrase: "falsehood and two-facedness injure the body and then the soul" (10: st.770), and his condition perfectly comes in accordance with the idea of consuming with vice we assume bodily temptation. Secular men mostly struggle with the outward stimulus. The notion of *injure* in *The Man in the Panther's Skin* should not be understood as bodily disease. This can be confirmed by one episode from John's *Gospel*<sup>2</sup> (John 5, 5-14), where the reason of a man's illness that is healed by the Christ, is the sin he has committed in the past. The well known Exegetics of gospel, Theophylact of Ohrid (Bulgaria) and Thomas Aquinas, have the similar understanding of subject. However, it should be said that the sin a man commits is not always

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<sup>1</sup>This text has been translated three times and poetically adapted twice in 18<sup>th</sup> century. This indicates importance of the text. The first translation belongs to Euthymius the Athonite. Tradition considers Ioane Petritsi as the author of the ancient poetic text. In 18<sup>th</sup> century it was rewritten one more time by Anton Catholicon.

<sup>2</sup>"And a certain man was there, which had been thirty and eight years in his infirmity. When Jesus saw him lying, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wouldest thou be made whole? The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. Jesus saith unto him, Arise, take up thy bed, and walk. And straightway the man was made whole, and took up his bed and walked. Now it was the sabbath on that day. So the Jews said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for thee to take up thy bed. But he answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk. They asked him, Who is the man that said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk? But he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in the place. Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing befall thee" (John 5, 5-14)

revealed in the form of disease due to *Gospel*. As it is indicated by the researcher of Rustaveli's text, Prof. Elguja Khintibidze: it is unambiguously stated in Rustaveli's poem that the sin (*falsehood and two-facedness*) unexceptionally injures the body and then the soul (8). Based on that, it is wrong to think that the phrase "injure the body and then the soul" should be understood as becoming diseased. On the contrary, it is clearly underlined in the *Gospel* that vice is not always revealed as physical illness.

On the other hand, committing the sin is nothing but injuring the body and the soul as well. Primary bearer of this vice is the body, as main committer of the heaviest sin of *falsehood and two-facedness*, which brings the human being to damaging spiritual eternal life as well. This topic should be more elaborated in accordance with the text of *the Man in the Panther's Skinn*. In particular, Avtandil as a secular man is less protected from corporal temptation he is surrounded with. We are talking about the temptation that harms, brings the vice in action through body and then consumes the soul too. If such action is repeatable, it becomes the part of one's essence. Hence, it would be impossible to heal such a diseased man: "I despise the man who is shameless, false, and treacherous" (10: st.779) - as Avtandil says. This is the man for whom *falsehood and two-facedness* are not the single action but rather the way of life, part of his essence. He would not be justified in next world, he would be presented before the God disgraced and sinful.

In my opinion, such an explanation of the above mentioned phrase, as well as indication of *The Ladder* as a source, is substantial and it is confirmed by one of the steps in the text: *On lying* where we read: "A lie is the destruction of love, and perjury is a denial of God!" (7: step 12)

As we have seen, the lie in John Climacus text is the denial of the God, it eventually is the beginning of everything evil: "Since lying is the source of all misfortunes, why should I abandon my friend, a brother by a stronger tie than born brotherhood?" (10: st.771) - states Avtandil in the testament. "Hypocrisy is the mother of lying and often its purpose. For some define hypocrisy as no other than meditation on falsehood, and an inventor of falsehood which has a reprehensible oath twisted up with it" (7: step 12) – as we read in *The Ladder*.

In the same way in *The Man in the Panther's Skin* treason, oath breaking and lying are interconnected and are equally unjustifiable wrong crime. According to Rustaveli's poem, oath is the most divine and the God punishes a man for its breaking: "I marvel why thou art come, thou breaker of thy binding oath, fickle and faithless, thou forsworn; but high Heaven will give thee guerdon and answer for this!" (10: st.507). Or even: "Then again I ventured to say: If I, O sun, have broken my vow to thee, may God now forthwith show his anger by hurling a thunderbolt from heaven upon me!" (10: st.516)

Oath is linked with the God, it is divine. Therefore one hardly can find even a single passage in *The Man in the Panther's Skin* that depicts breaking the oath by the main characters. "Thou dost well not to break the oath thou didst swear" (10: St. 688), or "This is because I cannot be false, I cannot do a cowardly deed; he would shame me when we meet face to face in that eternity where to we both shall come" (10: st.778) – writes Avtandil in his testament

where he continues the discussion about the lie and hypocrisy and their expected consequences - being shameful for the vice he had committed while being presented before the God. The same idea is developed in *The Ladder* in regard to lie and fake oath. The person who overcomes this step will achieve the truth “The twelfth step. He who has mounted it has obtained the root of all blessings” (7: step 12).

Avtandil is preaching the practical realizing of wisdom. It is the only way to reach God and obtain the truth: “I will not do it! What avails me the knowledge of the philosophizing of the philosophers! Therefore are we taught that we may be united with the choir of the heavenly hosts” (10: st.771).

On the contrary, lie hinders the process of reaching the God, achieve the ultimate truth. It is confirmed in *The Ladder*: “Let no one with right principles suppose that the sin of lying is a small matter, for the All-Holy Spirit pronounced the most awful sentence of all against it above all sins. If Thou wilt destroy all who tell lies, as David says to God, what will they suffer who stitch an oath on to a lie?” (7: step 12). Lie is considered to be unforgivable sin in both *The Ladder* and *The Man in the Panther’s Skin*. It is the source of all miseries, it is impossible to get to the next step on the Ladder and reach God, without overcoming this vice.

One of the first Georgian translations of the Ladder is made by Euthymius the Athonite. Georgian sources used in *The Man in the Panther’s Skin* are mainly based on the translations by Euthymius the Athonite. Research has revealed that *The Man in the Panther’s Skin* shows lexical similarity with the translation of *The Ladder* made by Petre Gelateli. In Kartvelological studies it was noticed that “Rustaveli Obviously is based on not only the Bible but also on the whole Georgian Clerical works” (8: pp. 356-357). It should also be mentioned that “Rustaveli is taking from Plato what is also acceptable for Christian theology” (8: pp. 474-497). An issue, extensive philosophical and theological treatises were written on, was presented by one phrase in Rustaveli’s poem, “I venture to remind thee of the teaching of a certain discourse made by Plato: falsehood and two-facedness injure the body and then the soul” (10: st.770). Despite such a reference given by the author direct formulation of the idea cannot be found in Plato’s dialogues.

Therefore, an issue of the interaction between the soul and the body is well known and topical in ancient and medieval ideology, where it had been widely discussed. Many philosophical and theological works had been dedicated to the issue. This subject was reflected later in literature that was conditioned by its popularity.

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