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LITHUANIAN POETS — STRANGERS AND CHILDREN OF THEIR NATIVE LAND*

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The values of the highly mobile, rapidly changing American civilization have become our own to a much larger extent than we imagine. Because of this, it is sometimes astonishing to realize how much more of the total meaning of life was centered for us around our native villages, our own little countries, a quarter of a century ago. Only the poets never seem to have forgotten, and we now turn to them to help us remember what life meant to us all in those days, before our dispossession. The paradox is that the poets cannot help us very much, because, in poetry, "home" is not an experienced, or remembered, reality, but, inevitably, an esthetic structure of the imagination.

In poetry, the values attached to the notion of "home" depend much less upon the intensity of feeling, or of remembrance, and much more upon the power of expression, that is, upon the poetic image, the musical cadences of words, and the associations evoked by rhyme and by the structural relationships between all parts of a poem. The poet may thus be truly a child of his native land, or a homeless exile, but in his work, in the realm of art, he lives in still another country. The real homeland, his and ours, becomes for the poet only a theme, or a topic — that is, only a medium for the embodiment of his poetic idea.

In this specific sense, every poet must confront a variety of forces indigenous to art itself, which lead him to a certain alienation from his native land, even as he writes about it. We shall look at some of these forces, present in Lithuanian poetry, under two aspects: the condition of exile, and life "at home," in Soviet-occupied Lithuania. At the beginning, in very general terms, we may speak of the following factors which tend to alienate the Lithuanian poet in Lithuania from his "home": first, the alienation from home because of its plain, omnipresent ordinariness. "Home" is something given, from which one must depart in order to become a poet. Second, alienation because of a lack of identity between what one feels the native land must be in poetic vision and what is offered to him instead — the myth of a huge multinational Soviet "fatherland." Third, alienation, both as a man and as a poet, because of inherent paucity of truth in the official image of that "fatherland."

In the West, the main factor of alienation is, perhaps, the distance between the poet as a creative person, and the receding reality of his land as a remembrance. He may turn to the independent values of his own art because the vague shadows of the past can no longer sustain his spirit. Moreover, the experiences of foreign civilizations, both in art and in life, provide a whole set of new stimuli for the exile writer.

An important place in the Lithuanian poetic tradition belongs to the imagery of the native earth itself, to intimate esthetic perceptions in a landscape which is intensely familiar and therefore profoundly meaningful to a poet. We sometimes call such writers the "poets of the soil," and prominent among them in exile is Kazys Bradūnas. His work in the early postwar years was throbbing with the pain of physical separation from his homeland — a pain so intense that it overwhelmed his very talent as a poet, reducing the scale of his poetic devices mostly to a few concrete details, signifying recurrent variations on the theme of exile. As the years went by, Bradūnas enriched the devices of his art, but at the cost of the immediacy of his feeling for the soil. His poetry grew in a sequence of symbolic structures, conveying conceptions of life centering around the idea of a ritual — an offering to God, re-embodied in countless generations of Lithuanians from time out of mind to the very present moment. The native earth, the forest, the sun, the toil of the peasant, and the blood of the warrior — all these lost their reality, in the sense that they no longer were something that a poet writes about, but became instead the signs and symbols, and images, serving Bradūnas' conception of life as a religious sacrifice.

Another "soil" poet, Alfonsas Nyka-Nyliūnas, became a stranger to his land almost as soon as he undertook to transform his sense of loss into a poetic entity. His early book, *The Symphonies of Dispossession*, does not, in essence, concern

itself with exile from a specific place, but rather with the much larger and more complex philosophical theme of man's eternal exile and return, of the opposed but simultaneous yearning for the blue distances of Eldorado and for the fires of home — a yearning which really conveys a profound existential search of personal integrity. Niliūnas found himself selecting and organizing only those aspects of his native land which could best serve the embodiment of his poetic - philosophical idea. The human being, the personal integrity, thus became transformed into a system of images borrowed from the soil but now composing only a symbolic visage of the poet, whom Niliūnas has called on one occasion the "man-landscape, man of mud and water," and whose face "brings to mind the fragments of a landscape of some sort, / With lake and little village, and the churchyard fence." In Niliūnas' later books, the poet's face took in the elements of many different landscapes, native and foreign, real and mythological, past and present, to become truly a cosmopolitan and timeless conception, indeed, the face of Orpheus, dismembered yet united in the inexplicable call of distant constellations.

At the beginning of exile, Jonas Mekas stood almost alone in a vividly drawn, complete landscape of his native village, recalled in every detail from a persistent, haunting remembrance. His *Idyls of Semeniškiai* seem at first like a kind of farmer's almanac, full of talk about the weather, and potato harvests, and of rivers, flax and smoke from the chimneys, and only gradually does the reader realize that this landscape is in fact a magical one, existing only through the grace of the poet's imagination, through his ability to imply, in the relationships between plain words, denoting simple country objects, another land of transcendental visions. In his later poetry, Mekas eliminated step by step all specific references to any particular homeland, trying at the same time to divest his words of meanings which suggest an imitation of reality, replacing these with meanings which a word acquires only in the specific verbal texture of poetry itself.

In Lithuania, a most explicit "soil" poet among the Lithuanians is Janina Degutytė. The physical aspects of the native countryside: fields, rivers, trees, the smell of grass, constitute the basic materials from which most of her poems are built. And yet, in reading her verse, we soon begin to understand that it is not the landscapes themselves that matter, but their symbolic, metaphorical implications. A dusty road in summer is compared to a linen towel, drying in the sun; a relationship is soon established between the folk ornaments on such a towel and the marks left on the road by recent history: tank treads, spots of blood on the ground, mute testimony to pain and terror and despair. The road, the towel turn into metaphors of Lithuania itself, depicting the truth of history. When this momentum of movement from thing to word to symbol is established, Degutytė becomes more and more interested in the esthetic interplay of other images as such. She begins to build her poems around contrasting semantic entities: the poetic "I" and the outside universe, the tree and the river, the colors black and white, and red and green. A poem becomes a structure of such balanced contrasts, and it no longer matters very much that the medium of their construction is the concrete, native Lithuanian land. On this purely artistic ground, she meets the "soil" writers of exile face to face, as fellow-artist, at home in their own special country.

Two things emerge from a comparison between the so-called "soil" poets at home and those in exile. One is, as we already noted, that what ultimately matters to both is the poetry itself, and not the native land as a material presence to be spoken about. The second, paradoxical discovery one makes is that the émigrés have more, and more important, poets of the soil than do the Lithuanians at home. This is not really very surprising, for it is only natural that the émigré, as man or artist, should cling with greater intensity of the homeland which is receding in his memory and without which he is really nothing in particular, than the poet at home, who is secure in the knowledge of where he is and can think of poetry as a departure for new horizons.

Another distinguishable category of Lithuanian poets, both at home and abroad, perceives their country in terms of myth, used often as a metaphor for time. That is to say, time in most of their poems is not the present, but the past, and the past itself is a mythological country, full of symbolic objects and beings whose ultimate significance resides in a poetic image of Lithuania transcending the sorrows of its own history. These poets seek to establish their true Lithuanian identity by withdrawing from the concrete realities of the present and by moving backwards in time, across mythological landscapes that exist in the poetic memory of the Lithuanian race.

In the West, Henrikas Nagys has recently emerged as one such poet, after writing for many years in the ordinary romantic mode, of friends, rebels and seekers of God. His latest book has an untranslatable title, *Broliai balti aitvarai*; something like "My brothers, the white, winged spirits." It is this conception of aitvaras, a mythological deity from the Lithuanian forests of long ago, that makes the whole difference. The book contains poems describing past landscapes transfigured in the racial memory by poetic emotion. Imaginary brothers of Nagys, our poet, walk across these landscapes and sing, or touch a tree, or sail a river, or again, speak to strangers from faraway lands, and their every act is a kind of magic ritual, transforming them into fabulous white bird-spirits at the same time as, by their presence, they create a timeless Lithuania, our secret inner home in times past, and now, and forever. But in the end, it is this magical process of creation itself, the verbal textures, the images and the sound cadences it requires, that constitutes the true worth of Nagys' eternal Lithuania.

In Lithuania, a number of good poets occupy themselves with time and myth, as if they were trying to escape their ordinary reality, and build themselves another, poetic one, instead. Some of them, like Judita Vaičiūnaitė, develop tightly controlled, complex verse structures, while others, like Eduardas Mieželaitis, tend occasionally to lose themselves in endless streams of words. Vaičiūnaitė has written rather little, but very carefully, using both urban and rural landscapes, often striving to achieve a central metaphor which, working on multiple planes of meaning, would imbue a poem with the spirit of myth and also liberate that myth from chronological sequences of time. For instance, in a poem, called "The Stone With a Horseshoe," from the cycle "Ancient Markings," Vaičiūnaitė uses the morning mist, first as a general metaphor denoting the opaqueness of antiquity, and then as a kind of structural screen, behind which it becomes possible to shift a given spot of

landscape rapidly from ancient past to the present moment, and then back again. The point of the poem is that, when the landscape returns to the ancient plane of time, it brings along with it the author's own present-day sensory awareness of the physical reality of her country. Thus the two disparate points in time become united in the poet's own consciousness as a sort of timeless continuum. That consciousness, then *is* the eternal homeland, is Lithuania. The poem goes as follows:

The axe of flint falls silent in the mist.
And in the mist the ancient sculptures drown.
The smell of juniper and fir-trees grows sharper in the mist,
And back into the mist the larks are flying,
the villages turn back into the mist...
And, through the rain, again, I hear
the horseshoe chiseled in the stone,
the rustling rye,
the distant neighing of a steed just broken in...

One might say that the poem moves from a sudden realization of just how really ancient is the stone with the horseshoe to the awareness that the present-day observer is himself just as old in the continuum of history.

Mieželaitis, on the other hand, seeks the presence of myth by means of extraordinarily complex verbal textures, in which, through persistent, overwhelming sound repetitions, as if thousands of words had suddenly gone berserk and decided to sound exactly alike, there gradually emerges a winter landscape, a frosted window, and in that window — a silvery-green shape of the serpent, the ancient pagan Lithuanian deity, and the subject of the famous folk tale, "Eglė, the Queen of Serpents."

Sigitas Geda, another mythological poet, is interesting in that he builds his myth upon a realistic, perhaps even prosaic, setting. His book, called *Strazdas*, is devoted to a Lithuanian poet-priest of the nineteenth century, a strange individual, uncouth, undisciplined, full of maverick notions concerning priesthood, and yet also full of great, sunny love for his land and his people. Sigitas Geda plays upon the priest's name, *Strazdas*, meaning "thrush," to create a mythical figure, half-man, half-bird, whose wings extend over the miserable poor, suffering Lithuanian serf villages and cast upon them the green shadow of his great love. The power of such poetry emerges from the interaction of two contrasting responses to the legends that have grown up around the folk memory of the priest *Strazdas*. On the one hand, Geda tries to imitate the reality remembered in the legends in its most naturalistic aspects, and, on the other, to transfigure that reality through his mythological half-bird of love. Here again, one must say that the poet's handling of the theme, his artistic skill, becomes more relevant to our experience than the subject itself.

In looking at the poets-mythmakers discussed just now, we become aware of a second paradox, in a sense, the reverse of that which applies to the poets of the soil. Here the themes of time and myth, and distance — which would seem so excellently suited to the poetry of exile — interest the poets at home much more. We could only cite Nagys as an émigré mythmaker, and that only in his latest book, while in Lithuania, in addition to those already mentioned, there are many more. It seems that the awareness of the mythological dimension, to the degree, at least, of being able to transform it into art, requires that one's roots be planted deeply in the native earth, from which, apparently, both the forests and the legends grow. Exile tends to become hermetical; it turns inside its own circle of memories and does not nourish the myth-making poetic imagination.

Perhaps the one poet who best understood the hermetical nature of exile was Algimantas Mackus. His poetry touches that of the myth-makers and soil poets at many points. There are in it images and turns of speech inherited from folksongs, and these lead us to ancient mythological references that haunt so strangely the thoroughly modern themes of Mackus' verse. There is also an immediacy of perception, a refined sensitivity to the feel and aroma of the soil, and a sense of man's organic bond with grass and water, snow and trees. But all these things do *not* establish a feeling of living continuity with one's homeland in either memory or hope. Quite the contrary, the entire universe of Mackus' poetry is permeated with the loneliness and finality of death.

The lyrical, life-loving folk images are subtly transformed into their own antithesis, so that the accustomed ornamental folk patterns of language, with their flowers and bees, and sweet mother sun, with all the gentle word-music of the Lithuanian diminutives, do somehow, without losing their fragile grace, speak of the ultimate chill of the grave. The myths, the legends, are so interwoven amidst the fierce, insane modern imagery of self-destruction that they reveal themselves as symbols of man's eternal illusions in the face of relentless oblivion. In the landscape, the colors of life: green grass and black soil, silvery dew — all are systematically transferred into the context of death. The point Mackus makes concerns the nature of truth and the recognition of reality: exile and death are real; home and hope are illusions. The paradox is that, by his resolute refusal to return, even in his dreams, to the homeland that now could never be, Mackus has somehow touched the imagination of readers back in Soviet-occupied Lithuania: we now hear voices from across the sea, claiming that Mackus must, that he will belong to them. I am afraid that what they mean is that Mackus' work can furnish, as it were, poetic proof of the pointlessness of our exile. If they could rightly understand his poetry, they would see that the opposite may well be true — that the deadly patterns of illusions may actually describe their own tragic misconception that they possess, and belong to, the violated land in which they live.

There are, however, poets in Soviet-occupied Lithuania who know how to possess their native land, at least within the universes of their own words. They do it by controlling and selecting and utilizing all the realities of home in order to produce something uniquely, individually their own. A familiar landscape may, for instance, provide the starting point for a sequence of images, which, in themselves, are not about the native land, but rather of it — images pursuing their own poetic purpose, but made of the fabric of homeland realities. Perhaps it would be best to cite a poem by one such poet, Juozas Marcinkevičius:

Here, in the stream of grass — the stork's red legs.
The stream of grass is foam-reflected with daisies.

The cows have stopped — the lazy, well-fed fish,
That move their spacious ears, like fins.
The little cloud — a whitish slice of tree —
Will float along above them and will, so floating, melt.

And in the stream of grass the houses are like pebbles,
So kind, so warm, possessing no eternity.
The wagons, it would seem, will sound their horns,
Like barges, floating by, through me.

So, in this stream of grass, serene and cool,
I don't distinguish the above from the below.
The birch tree, stretching out its branches down along the stream,
Will be the end and the beginning of a rounded world.

What strikes the eye here is the poet's easy, even cozy, familiarity with all the things that populate his native landscape. There is no strain of yearning, such as one might find in an exile poet, and no rhetorical emotionalism of someone anxious to convince the reader that here, indeed, is the beloved homeland. Marcinkevičius, so to speak, is on friendly terms with everything that moves and lives, and all these things around him do generously permit him to play with them — to transform grass to water and cows to fish, because the country, as it were, knows that its own child, this poet, will do it no harm. This is what I mean by possession: because what we see in the poem is a landscape which could be found anywhere at all, we know that the poet is truly at home in it, that he is in full control of its poetic possibilities. This is the universality of a single spot on earth. Needless to say, the value of this poem then resides not in the materials, but in their transformation, in the quality of art. There are several such poets now writing in Lithuania, most of them very good and skillful, and it is comforting to read them and become immersed in the illusion of having returned to one's home, transported there by the magic green carpet or verse.

And yet, the question is: can an exile really come back, even to the landscapes of these young poets? Or, to say the same thing differently, can he withstand the finality of his separation? Because it seems that learning to live without the native land is in itself a kind of return. One must transcend the pain, transcend one's birthright to a spot on earth in order to possess it in the way that poets do — as a wellspring of thoughts and images from which to build a universe belonging entirely to oneself. That is, the yearning for one's home and the remembrance of it, must no longer define the nature of one's poetry, but serve it, as it is served by any experiences, in whatever alien land. The difficult nobility of such transcendence is perhaps most clearly evident in the poems of Liūnė Sutema, a close friend of Mackus, who has, through long and painful struggle, liberated her poetic and personal integrity from the relentless memories of home. The mood of her poems might be illustrated by the following piece, called "I Do Not Betray, I Merely Return," from the collection *The Faceless Land*.

I return the blind alley, overgrown with poplars.
Beyond the gate, there is the cemetery,
which has a Lithuanian name — —
I am returning the blind alley to those who hold my childhood
in their cramped and twisted hands.
Let them guard my childhood,
let them instruct it to repeat, repeat the same
slogans, oaths and promises — —
and when it chokes on repetitions
as if upon a magic apple,
let them take it out beyond the gate,
across a stretch of land that has been baptized
with Lithuanian name,
and leave it by the fence, to grow its roots.
And now my childhood will be sitting there alone,
and mute, playing with the pebbles — —, i
n the cemetery for unbaptized children,

along the fence — —
throwing its pebbles at me.

The lesson one might learn from this brief glance at the Lithuanian postwar poetry at home and abroad is, perhaps, rather obvious. The poet as a human being can feel himself to be dispossessed in exile and alienated at home, but for his art such feelings are, in an important sense, irrelevant. He lives, as we have said, in still another land. And there, in the realm of art, the exile and the poet at home do meet and work together as children of the special country of their own.

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