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KAZYS BINKIS AND THE POETIC TRADITIONS OF THE 1920s.

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Kazys Binkis, who lived between 1893 and 1942, occupies a very special place in Lithuanian literature. The purity of his poetry, the desire to create new forms, new poetic worlds, the youthful spirit that pervades his verses have contributed to creating the image of Binkis as an innovator. It has become a tradition to refer to him and the group of poets clustered around him — the "Keturvėjininkai" — as to "futurists".

The first question, then, that arises when investigating Binkis' work is: was he a true futurist, and if so, what kind of futurism does he represent? For differences between Marinetti¹ and the Russian futurists² are quite considerable. Both build on the word "future", it is true, but none invents it: already Paul Verhaeren had exclaimed: "Futur, vous m'exaltez comme autrefois mon Dieu!" Typographic experimentation also starts earlier: with Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés". Present-day world with its prosaic qualities irrupts in some poems of Baudelaire several decades before the futurists start to write. On the other hand, when Binkis and his "Keturių Vėjų" group start experimenting, the rest of Europe sees the rise of Dada and Surrealism. As a consequence, it would seem more appropriate to call this group simply avant-garde poets.

There are many points all the poets of those years have in common: insistence on absolute freedom; desire to break away from traditional forms and imagery; interest in folklore;³ refusal of sentimentalism. They all search for "abbreviated" forms⁴ based on the technique of substitutions and analogies. Much experimenting is done with sounds, neologisms, "compact words"⁵. A desire common to all is to achieve velocity, kaleidoscopic changes, to create dynamic worlds.

Binkis has never been as radical as any of the futurists. He does not proclaim, as Marinetti⁶, total destruction of syntax, use of verbs in the infinitive only, independent clusters of adjectives or adverbs. Nor has he tried to write poems consisting of unconnected syllables or of vowels only, as those by Kruchenykh found in *Slovo kak takoe* or *Kokhlaya luna*.⁷ He would probably never have preached the superiority of "zaum"-language which, according to the Russian futurists, reaches beyond understanding; nor would he have subscribed to Marinetti's "paroliberismo" or produced a piece like his *Zang Tumb Tumb*. In the presentation, in the outward appearance of the books the extravagance among the Lithuanian poets is considerably less. One could say that Binkis' main motive for writing is not "épater le bourgeois" or to produce a "slap in the face of the public". His poetry never becomes a mere game, a riddle, or a succession of mathematical signs. There is less stress on the erotic element so abundant in the Italian futurists, and less evolution toward epic writing, as in the Russians.

The specific character of Binkis' and his group's poetry might be explained considering the historical background in which it was born. While the boldest experimenting sprang forth in free European countries not stirred yet by the menace of the First World War, and then as a reaction to it (Dada, Surrealism), Lithuania was still struggling for free expression under an occupation so severe that between 1864 - 1904 all use of the national language in print had been forbidden. Romanticism as well as symbolism came later to Lithuania; the terrain was not quite as ready for great verbal, phonetic, typographic revolutions as in other countries. This may explain the close adherence to traditional, popular metre and imagery. It may also account for the fact that the new "revolutionary" poets did not affiliate with a political party. To create free Lithuanian poetry was their goal.⁸

The literary movement that preceded the "Four Winds", whose first proclamation appeared in 1922, was symbolism. Hence, a reaction surges against it just as the Russian futurists react against Russian symbolism. But the immediate poet receiving even greater attacks is Maironis: the great romantic bard of patriotism who writes in set metres and rhythms about set subjects, idealizing them strongly. Around the twenties, this type of poetry had been repeated so much that it felt

stale. Curiously enough, Binkis himself cannot escape entirely Maironis' influence; more than once, most probably unawares, he borrows the cadence of this verse.

Binkis himself is a product of several cultures. Having learned Russian at the age of nine, he felt at home in Russian literature and counted among his friends poets like Balmont and Bielyi. On the other hand, from 1920 to 1923 he studied in Berlin, where he became acquainted with the new literary movements of Western Europe. Thus, he served as a catalyst, and one of his great merits was initiating, in 1922, weekly "literary afternoons" at his home. New literary trends were discussed there, great European poets read and commented, some translations made. It was in these "afternoons" that the first "modernist" poems of the group were given attention. This was probably the first conscious effort to elevate Lithuanian writing to equal level with that of other European countries, to bring it "up to date"; a desire to transcend national limits without ceasing to be Lithuanian.

If one tries to trace foreign influences in Binkis, one usually encounters the mention of Maiakovskii⁹ or the German expressionists.¹⁰ It would be preposterous to doubt that Russian futurism was known to Binkis and gave him the impulse to search for new modes of expression. When it comes to naming *one* poet, however, I submit that the general spirit found in many poems of Vasilii Kamenskii seems of greater likeness to the mood present in Binkis' verse than that of Maiakovskii. Kamenskii is less violent, less somber, less party-oriented than even the early Maiakovskii. His enthusiastic affirmation of the world, his praise of the sun and of spring, his adherence to nature and traditional rhythms make more readily think of Binkis. Both have similar constructions based on series of impressions; repetitions; at times, lines with sound experimentation only intertwined with others that have meaning. The Kamenskii before 1920, as Binkis, does not necessarily tell a story or give a message: both transmit immediate reality and joy that arises from it.¹¹

The poetry of Kazys Binkis shows even more affinities — in a very large sense of the word, considering that quality which Juan Ferrate, in his *Teoría del poema*, calls the "soul" of a poem — with some representatives of the Spanish Generation of 1927, especially Rafael Alberti and, to a certain extent, Garcia Lorca.¹² The first books of Alberti,¹³ as Binkis' *Eilėraščiai (Poems)* (1920), are mainly based on popular traditions, on folklore imagery with some admixture of an incipient new world, on popular rhymes. Both make very free use of the diminutive: another folkloric device. The poetry contained in these books was born less out of protest than of necessity to sing. Since the folklore of the two countries is quite different, it is not surprising to find thematic and structural differences. The world evoked by Alberti is that of his native Andalusian seashore; Binkis sings the Lithuanian inland-village life. It is impossible in this case to speak of any influence: *Eilėraščiai* preceded *Marinero en tierra* by four years. Yet, the spirit that prevails in both, is very much akin. All in both books is transparency, lightness, innocence. In both, a close link with nature can be felt; remembrances of the gaiety of childhood surge at every step. Theirs is a dynamic shifting of images; both produce the impression of flying on the wings of wind. Both show an entirely traditional, lyrical approach to the love theme, similar to the most ancient "Frauenlieder" or "jarchas"; or there is a carefree youth singing for no other reason but happiness. Theirs is "aero-poesia" in the best sense of the word: not full of aeroplanes, but rising up to the sky through sheer purity, light as air.

Even later development of these poets has many a note in common: they evolve toward the satire, but again, it is not biting, rather humoristic and light.¹⁴ Proletarian themes find entrance into their poetry. They start writing drama at a certain point, but again, this drama has little in common with the "teatro sintetico della simultaneità" of Marinetti or the attempts in breaking away from all tradition by Maiakovskii or Kruchenykh. In the Spanish poets as in Binkis there is social criticism, but it is presented within a traditional frame. Their theatre is less violent; there remains a lyrical note in it. Finally, all three write for children, and very successfully, because they enter the world of the child, present images seen through the eyes of a child, ask questions that a child would ask. In this, Alberti and Garcia Lorca adhere more to the lyric quality¹⁵, whereas Binkis proves himself to be an excellent story-teller trying in a subtle way to form the character of the children.

For neither of these poets is surprise the main factor. Much more important seems to suggest. None has practiced automatic writing. There is great originality in their verse — but it is innate, not coldly planned or oniric.

The more vanguard-tinted Binkis emerges in his second book, *100 Pavasarių (Hundred Times Spring)* (1926)¹⁶. In a subtitle he explains that this is a collection of poems suited to the feeling of the times, expressed in a "somewhat more modern way". The figure of the poet reflected in the book has not changed a great deal. Only the nostalgic tone of some early poems has subsided: we encounter here a carefree youth who is out to play tricks. All appears even more dynamic than in the first book, where dynamism had been achieved mainly through a variety of verbs. Here, the imagination is invited to jump from image to image: he wants to awaken the reader. This book also includes some parodies of earlier poets done with immense grace. Here, Binkis introduces non-poetic, spoken every-day language, much more "detached" images. There is repetition of the same lines or the same words; some lines are made up entirely of sounds without any meaning.¹⁷ It is in this book that city images showing the absurd gain entrance. Even in the most daring poems, however, there is an overall lyric thread that helps to tie them together, as do some attitudes that carry over from *Eilėraščiai*: again, we see the poet almost drunk with life, wind and skies, happily singing in spring-time.

It is curious to observe that although Binkis accepts most precepts of the vanguard movements: break with the rhetoric traditions, elimination of sentimentalism, incorporation of modern-world themes, superposition and free association of images, interest in the extraordinary,¹⁸ yet his poetry could never be called de-humanized, cold, artificial.¹⁹ Even the most futuristic poems have human dimensions in-between the fragments and are full of faith in poetic creativity.

The two books of Binkis could be taken as an example of the prevalent tendencies among Lithuanian poets in the Twenties, which have also been exemplified in two anthologies prepared by Binkis. *Vainikai (Wreaths)* which appeared in 1921, groups mainly poems where a great preoccupation with the folkloric tradition is evident. *Antrieji Vainikai (Other Wreaths)*, of 1936, has many pages of vanguard-type experiments. Some still preserve a certain traditional mood; others become so interested in exploring the surprises they almost forget that they are writing poetry (Žengė, Rimydis). In this anthology, as in Binkis' second book, wind is an important theme; all lines breathe enthusiasm; they soar freely through the skies. It is here that one finds the new religion of the futurists: velocity.

Looking back on these experiments, one draws a conclusion often repeated by critics of poetry: what is purely fashion, passes; what rests on popular traditions and human qualities, remains. Therefore today we are inclined to say that the best Binkis is found in *Eilėraščiai*, as one is tempted to affirm of Alberti's *Marinero*, for which none less than Juan Ramon Jiménez has given a perfect definition in 1924 already: "Popular poetry, but not easily born; most personal; of true Spanish stock, but without the unnecessary repetitions; new, fresh and perfectly finished at the same time; subdued, agile, full of grace, twinkling: most Andalusian".²⁰ As for Binkis, the evaluation of his poetry offered by J. Aistis in 1952 seems the most adequate to conclude these considerations: "We do not have indeed another poet who would be so transparent, so full of light and clarity".²¹

1 His first manifesto appeared in 1909.

2 The first "futurist" poems of Khlebnikov date back to 1908, the formation of *Hylaea* to 1909, *A Slap in the Face of Public* to 1912.

3 Marinetti is an exception: his is an entirely modern, urban world; only in one instance does he admit the popular: suggesting to introduce some Neapolitan "conzonette" to Wagner's operas in order to "give them more life" (F. T. Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, Milano, 1968)

4 Already Apollinaire manifests great interest in the Japanese "hai-kais", and among Binkis' masterpieces are the "utos", or "essays in micro-poetry".

5 Khlebnikov, in order to achieve a fuller value of significance, construes new words taking a syllable from one, another from a second word, and thereby, according to him, achieving three notions in a single word. Kamenskii, in his turn, creates "ferro-concrete" words also supposed to be more compact.

6 *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista*, 1912.

7 An example by Kruchenych: euyu / iao / oa / oaeeieya / oa / euiei / iee / iijieiy. (*Kokhlaya luna*, 1913).

8 It is curious to observe how very similar principles lead the Italian futurists to adhere to Fascism in 1919 (later rescinding), whereas in Russia and in France (the surrealists) they profess Communism. The Lithuanian non-affiliation might explain the fact that in literary criticism published in Soviet Lithuania these poets are quickly dismissed as authors of "decadent bourgeois poetry with no ideals", e. g. Introduction by B. Pranskus to *K. Binkio satyrinės poemos* (Kaunas, 1947), or K. Korsakas, *Lietuvių literatūros istorija*, III (Vilnius, 1958).

9 Vide K. Korsakas, op. cit., p. 523.

10 J. Aistis, Introduction to K. Binkis, *Lyrika* (Chicago, 1952), p. 19.

11 I am specifically thinking of poems such as "Polden" (1910), "Ruskii zveniden" (1910), "Cija-cint" (1917) (Vasilii Kamenskii, *Stichotvorenia i poemy*. Moskva-Leningrad, 1966, p. 53, 57, 107).

12 Binkis reminds of Garcia Lorca mainly because of his personality: gay, captivating, the soul of every reunion, full of organizing talents. Both want to take the poetic word to the people at large (Russian futurists have also advocated poetry recitals in public squares), with the secret hope of educating them. Garcia Lorca achieved this through his theatre; Binkis, through his numerous satirical poems. In both, musical inclination accompanies poetic creation: Lorca is always sitting at the piano; Binkis appears everywhere with a mandolin. Many poems of both have later been set to music. Both display the same talent for creating a plastic image with a few words and intensifying it by sound, thereby achieving almost a triple effect. Three little poems may well illustrate this:

Lulla, lolla, lalla-lu,	Crotalo.
Liza, lolla, lylla-li,	Crotalo.
chvoi sujat sujat,	Crotalo.
Ti-i-i, Ti-i-i-i-i.	Escarabajo sonoro.

Purienai papieviuose papuro.

Ir vaikigaliai, kaip gervės,

Po papievius gūrinėja.

Purienų visiems po purą.

The first, "Finlandija", by Elena Guro (*Slovo kak takoe*, 1913) only plays with sounds, creating a very effective atmosphere. The two others combine sound, rhythm and image. The short poem of Garcia Lorca (from *Poema del Cante Jondo, Obras Completas*, Madrid, 1958, p. 254) not only reproduces the sound of a castagnette and the rhythm of a *seguidilla*, but also presents a colorful metaphor: a sonorous black beetle. Similarly, in one stanza Binkis shows mastery in alliteration as well as word choice: next to the sprightly image of a meadow full of marigolds, based on the sound "p", he evokes, alliterating the "g", half-grown lads wading through it like cranes. (From *Šimtas pavasarių*, *Lyrika*, p. 94).

13 *Marinero en tierra* (1924), *La Amante* (1925).

14 An exception are Alberti's violent poems written during the Civil War.

15 Neither Alberti nor Lorca have published separate books dedicated specially for children. They incorporate lullabies into their early books of poetry.

16 Again, he precedes Alberti whose surrealist experiment — *Sobre los ángeles* — is of 1929.

17 J. Aistis (op. cit.) draws the attention to the fact, however, that even these lines in a certain way remain true to the popular traditions.

18 One poem is called "40°" and presents the hallucinations of a person suffering from high fever. It does remind of the group of "41°" formed by Kruchenych in Tiflis.

19 The criticism pronounced by J. Ortega y Gasset in his *La deshumanización del arte* (1925) would not be quite applicable in Binkis' case.

20 Rafael Alberti, *Poesías Completas* (Buenos Aires, 1961), p. 50. (One would have, of course, to substitute "Lithuanian" for "Spanish" to apply it to Binkis).

21 op. cit., p. 22.