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A LOOK AT SOME RECENT POETRY FROM LITHUANIA

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Contemporary Lithuanian poetry is like a rose with overlapping petals from various generations now courting the Muse. In the past, several decades or even a century could wait for the poets to complete their quest and gain acceptance by the readers. Today in Lithuania time and events move faster than this normal creative cycle, with the result that separate generations find themselves responding to the same new challenges, often in a similar manner. There are, of course, some rather palpable differences. Poets born in late twenties and the thirties, such as Janina Degutytė (1928), Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930), Jonas Juškaitis (1933), Albinas Bernotas (1934), Marcelijus Martinaitis (1936), Judita Vaičiūnaitė (1937), and even the younger Sigitas Geda (1934) were much concerned with issues of ethnic identity, searching for it in the deep realm of myth and in the writ of history. Their poems were fragrant with nature, or, as the case may be, malodorous with what our civilization has done to it. Their trademarks were village life as opposed to the city, romantic patriotism set against the imperial Soviet mentality, and indeed, as in Marcinkevičius, the image of a ritualized course of life, as if professing some sort of a Lithuanian religion, with nature as its temple.

The younger generations, born in the forties and fifties, seek a much more direct confrontation with the political situation in Lithuania, are more militant about ecology and at the same time intensely concerned with the mysteries of the poet's craft, at times to the point of enclosing themselves in hermetic cages of what might be called "existential semiotics." They search for a universality of Lithuanian culture, building links of poetic imagination with both the mythologies and the contemporaneity of other cultures around the globe, and they are also highly aware of history as a shaping force of the nation. Nevertheless, it is often hard to draw a clear line between the generations, because all the concerns of the young have their strong reflection in the older generation as well, and in turn, many new poets are deeply committed to the values of those who preceded them and are still active in their midst.

It is in fact difficult to keep these younger poets securely within a definite horizon, because there are so many of them, suddenly appearing in various periodicals and coming out with small first-collection booklets at an almost frightening rate. One may, however, distinguish at least two overall modes of poetry, even if they do overlap in the work of individual authors. There is the poetry of civic concern, addressed to the relationship of an individual with time and events in the nation, informed with a broad sense of history, and an inward-looking poetry of multiple encoding of the individual experience, the poetic self.

The historical outlook becomes manifest first of all in the poets' response to the liberating winds let loose by Gorbachev's perestroika. It is a bitter response, and it comes from a wide span of age, from Julius Keleras, born in 1961, to the veteran Stasys Anglickis (b. 1905). The change in the poets' voices does not echo a difference between the older and younger generations, but rather between today's verse and that of a decade or two ago. Some, like Jonas Juškaitis and others, are now publishing poems they had written in the fifties and sixties and put away in a drawer.¹ Reading this poetry is like standing in a doorway, finally open, feeling a stale draft of long-suffering anger rushing out while at the same time the foul and most unnatural stench of tyranny pours in from mass graves across the entire Soviet land.

Some poets seek to assimilate their outrage to the aesthetic norms of the poetic genre and respond to events in the language of metaphor, as does Gintaras Patackas (b. 1951) in the poem "Pontius Pilate No. ..." ² There the bloody story of oppression in Lithuania during the Soviet occupation is told in terms of the tragedy of Chile when it was taken over by the dictator Pinochet. The meeting point of this metaphor and its referent, Lithuania, is Christianity, for it itself was born at the bloody moment when Pontius Pilate transformed justice into crucifixion. In a cycle of poems entitled "Pontius Pilate Number..." , Patackas describes Pinochet's transformation into a predatory dictator:

and you, astonished, look into the mirror
and see damnation as it comes to be before your eyes
and see your face turning into snout
your back as it stoops down to make it easier
to grab your victim; then you dress yourself
in satin furs of predatory beasts
above the fields, the waning and horrendous moon
pulls from your throat the great primeval cry
the lights go out in windows
the little birds no longer rustle in the brush
and, stupefied with grandeur and with might,
you drink the murky wine of treason.

The Lithuanian reader immediately recognizes this image as the picture of Stalin which he previously had to endure as it stared at him from every wall.

A fellow poet, Stasys Jonauskas (b. 1948) uses the metaphor of grain to symbolize the endurance and the powers of resurrection in his long-suffering land:

They cannot grind it all,
Nor drive by force from home.
It sprouts anew and is green again
As if there never was a war.³

The grain, serving as a metaphor for agricultural Lithuania, gives the same meaning to the endless historical cycles of its death and resurrection as the farmer's ordinary labor has always contained, and links these processes with the very forces of nature, giving the country's stubborn patience an aura of natural invincibility.

Donaldas Kajokas (b. 1953) in some of his poems exploits the traditional strong presence of nature in Lithuanian poetry to reveal with a sudden and revolting clarity the ugly mutilation of the countryside by the presence of Soviet concentration camps.

The poem "Springtime IV"⁴ begins charmingly enough with violets on the snow-covered slopes and a little girl straining upwards to look at the catkins, only to continue without even a change of pace or tone:

lean rats enjoy the warm, dear sun,
their flanks, consumed by some disease
were steaming horribly...

and so on, to the guard towers rattling in the wind and the entire desolate landscape where humans so recently plied their murderous trade. In other poems, Kajokas reinforces his point by using one of the most beautiful human creations, Bach's St. Matthew Passion, as a metaphor to depict his own nation in terms of such fantastic, unendurable visual horror of disaster and torture that Hieronymus Bosch seems gentle and mildly amusing by comparison. The epitaph of this poem dedicates it to his mother, whose age witnessed the rape of her country, and it says in Latin: "Dolor animi gravior est, quam corporis."

Aside from this critical, or apocalyptic, mode, Kajokas reveals himself as a poet who likes to focus upon the slightest nuances of perception and to nurse from them an awareness of the inner core of being. There is also a great deal of tender love in him, sometimes just touched with a puckish sense of humor, as in the poem about his own little daughter:

Moon from a dream. A crib.
The wing of a wooden horse.
A warm, sleepy angel
Sitting on the night-pot

The father's moonlit fancy that his daughter must have dreamt of a moon has filtered through the room and charmed the wings of poetry in it: the toy horse became Pegasus, and the child — an angel. The potty, of course, returns us reassuringly to our human predicaments.

Julius Keleras (b. 1961)⁵ is also very angry about the destruction of his nation, and the Christmas wafer in the title of his latest book often tastes of blood and tears, and of the bitter herbs of exile, and often only ghosts will gather from Siberian snows and form the death-drenched Lithuanian guerrilla forests to sit like evening shadows at the table. Keleras tells their story with a relentless, lucid calm that tames the poet's seething anger. Vytautas Cinauskas (b. 1930), Keleras' senior by some thirty years, still shares the same outrage. He is also more explicit in making the point that Lithuanians were not by any means alone in this tragedy of the misbegotten empire, that Russians, Caucasians and others suffered as well, and he derives from this a sort of brotherhood of the outraged.⁶

Stasys Anglickis, in one recently published group of poems,⁷ shows his painful awareness that the political rape of his country was inevitably accompanied by its economic ruination and ecological disaster. Indeed, he perceives something sinister even in modern technology itself, regardless of political systems. In one of the poems he says: "Motor vehicles

have stabbed and slashed the cities / The ugly heads of the computers / are bursting through into the cosmos." the poet says he still sings of love, but no longer believes that love can save the world. For Anglickis:

such is the halo of the end —
the fish are choking in the Northern
Sea, are gasping in the river Nemunas —
their convulsions cramp their gills.
The victory of man,
in the struggle for survival —
the start of the death of nature,
the wake of the suffering soul.

Some poets attempt to add a dimension of depth to their observations of contemporary events by relating them to a historical perspective. There are several different approaches to this. Among the younger poets, Vladas Braziūnas (b. 1952) has published verse of a rather simple weave⁸ somewhat reminiscent of folk rhythmic patterns, partially imitating the style of nineteenth-century Lithuanian historical songs. This creates an atmosphere in which Braziūnas can recount the events of the last half-century in a sorrowful, bitterly pensive light, as if he were just a homespun chronicler from the village, albeit more articulate and philosophical than most. In this way, the living pain of memory achieves the dignity and distance of history.

A much broader view is taken by Vytautas Bložė (b. 1930). In prefacing his collection *Polyphonies* (1981)⁹ Bložė declared that he seeks "to give meaning to the universality of human existence in various planes of space and time." He tries to accomplish this by structuring our sometimes murky consciousness of the flow of life into a poetic text. For this purpose, he not only creates a particular perspective, a place in the mind and outside of history, but also develops a statement about history as it flows through us by taking separate complexes of time, space and events, discrete worlds of little inherent relevance to each other and bringing them by poetic association into relationships that can speak to our understanding. This approach is dominant in a more recent work, a versified family chronicle that aspires to the status of a novel.¹⁰

Bložė's younger colleague, Kornelijus Platelis (b. 1951) has written a narrative poem entitled *Bloody Mass*.¹¹ It deals with the destiny of the priest Antanas Mackevičius, a Lithuanian leader of the 1863 Polish-Lithuanian uprising against Moscow's rule. His approach is similar to that of Bložė, but he also has an extraordinary sense of immediacy of the human experience, so that past becomes present, and we have the *dimension* of history created in Lithuanian poetry, perhaps for the first time since the Polish romantics, and since the Lithuanian rhetoric of the years of independence. It was precisely this humanity of the historical process from which the people could derive a sense of their own historical legitimacy as a culture that the Soviet regime had taken away, substituting for it the pseudo-history that was part of official Marxist doctrine.

An interesting feature of recent Lithuanian poetry in its historical aspect is the gravitational pull exercised upon it by the record of Biblical past and especially by Hellenic antiquity. This can be understood: the patient journey to drink from the Holy Grail of mythological ethnic consciousness, endured with love by many poets¹² may have been good for the soul, but it also left them and their readers with a sense of misty solitude. Under the oppressive Soviet cultural imperialism, a deep longing developed for another wellspring — the common Greco-Judean source of all Western civilization.

Gintaras Patackas is one of the witnesses to this longing. Among his books, *The Expulsion From Paradise* (1981), *Amulets* (1988) and *The Youth of Homer* (1989) are especially rich with references to Hellenic antiquity, albeit sometimes sarcastic, as in the prose poem about Diogenes¹³ where the misanthropic philosopher is compared to a "wise dog" in a rotten barrel who does not bark nor bite, nor eat, thus hoping to recover the spirit of Cerberus. The truth of the matter is, however, that Patackas is satirizing the present by filtering it through the myth and golden legend of Greece, after which our own comings and goings, distilled of all pretense, stand revealed for the grotesques that they are. Stasė Lygutaitė-Bucevičienė (b. 1936) takes a similar stance in "Three Measures of Barley,"¹⁴ a biting poem, that presents an allegory of the faithless mercantile spirit of our century in the mindless prattle of the merchants driven from the temple under ominously silent heavens, just before the trumpet blows.

Tautvyda Marcinkevičiūtė (b. 1955), in her latest book *Tauris*¹⁵ speaks in a lyrical voice of shifting realities evocative of the world of antiquity. There is a pebbly, diminutive world in the book warm with swallow nests and bright with neck laces of dewdrops, that represents Iphigenia to another world, of our day, a drab and mendacious reality, arrogantly full of itself. Marcinkevičiūtė is also fond of transitions from one category of being to another, not exactly as in a metaphor, but "really," when words and things continue functioning in a new way after having been turned into something else: a cat becomes the God of War, his victims the conquered peoples of ancient myths, and our own New World transforms Elektra to a plug in the wall, and the Golden Fleece becomes the beard shaved in the morning, and the ship of the Argonauts — a travel bag. In the end, however, we begin to perceive that the world of our day is not really being exposed to ridicule, but rather ennobled by its capacity to evoke, even by reverse, negative means, the dreams of the Golden Age. the slightly humorous, satirical tone of the poems lends a comfortable human warmth to both epochs.

Social commitment is not the only thing that makes poetry relevant to human experience. There is also the matter of relationship between the word and the individual "I" which, when transfigured into art, becomes both a personal and a universal statement about that quality of life which matters most of all, whether it is directly connected with particular

circumstances and events or not. The poets already discussed, as well as many others, do function in this dimension as well.

One poet who conveys a strong "classical" flavor, not necessarily in thematics but more in style and mood of his verse is Antanas A. Jonynas (b. 1953). His collection *Parabola*¹⁶ follows with care the shifts in a new reality, when something has been changed by such universal particulars as death, time, or, in the verbal category, by a discovered image, and is then further transformed by poetic emotion into an artistic text. Curiously, then, the world thus renamed is no longer held together for Jonynas by emotion, but rather by the cohesive power of the artistic utterance. There are strange bleak spaces in his poems, not evoked by spatial terms, but by images which, to be felt, as, for instance, in the following stanza from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," require a perception of space around them:

When in the night just before sleep
a window comes afloat in memory
behind it drooping apple boughs
behind these water framed
upon the asphalt of the summer night
three utterances innocent break through
and having missed their meaning
I now descend the staircase of the dream
(*Parabola*, p. 28).

Jonynas seems to be writing in a language in which only a part of what is being said is actually articulated; the rest remains inside the mind but acts upon it and fills in the empty spaces to create a meaning, even though the realized words upon the surface may seem ungrammatical, or even meaningless. In this, Jonynas somewhat resembles the Russian poet Osip Mandel'shtam, whose poetry contains intimations of something more than words can say, discernible in the "empty spaces" across which words meet and interact. In the Lithuanian exile, Henrikas Radauskas and Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas manifest similar qualities in their verse.

Rolandas Rastauskas (b. 1954), in his collection *The Album*¹⁷ writes simple-sounding but rather hermetical verse, where decoding depends to a large extent on the intertextuality of the reader's own metaphoric imagination with the universal record of myth and culture. In reading Rastauskas, one needs to summon up in the mind a large and complex world of associations from the world's cultural heritage and keep adjusting all its parts until they begin to "fit together" with what is written and implied in the poems; then the text fulfills itself as art. Many of the references are to the world of theater, particularly on Shakespearean themes, as in the line which recalls the nightmare of "Macbeth hath murdered sleep": "the dream was thrust into the body, but did not spill blood." There are also intertextual connections with the pictorial art, such as this subtle reference to Van Gogh's famous painting of the chair in his room at Arles: "the orange-colored Van Gogh is dreaming of the chair of destiny as yet for us not put together."

Painting and other fine arts are important in the poetry of Eduardas Juchnevičius (b. 1942) who is himself a graphic artist and has provided his own illustrations to his first book of verse, *The Werewolves* (1988).¹⁸ It is predominantly a satirical book, lightly touched with absurdity. His satire extends beyond social concerns to seek a humorous-critical perspective upon the very nature of things. A poem called "Sand Bug," for instance, works toward a conclusion where a bird and an insect are brought together in their ultimate "ich-und-du" relationship with death. The poet gets there across a sandy, sun-baked landscape where "the dragon of time devours the manna of dust," and thus we understand that this bird-bug confrontation depicts our own destiny.

Juchnevičius is a playful poet of grim implications to his dry humor; yet, he remains resolutely within the realm of image, of art, without entering the ponderous precincts of philosophy.

Romas Daugirdas (b. 1951) also uses puckish humor to break up verbal networks of accustomed meanings and reassemble them in images like the following: "the teachers, and others, hung from the New Year's tree smelling of chalk, pancakes and conscience."¹⁹ For L. Daugirdas, the shift of reality required to make poetry of it includes an element of game, or one might even say that ultimately it is nothing but an amusing game all along.

Another player with words is Onė Baliukonytė (b. 1948), but she has no intention to amuse anyone. Reality is broken up not like crystals in a kaleidoscope, but rather like a martyr upon the rack. As in Kajokas' St. Matthew Passion, so here, the poet descends, as to Hades, to the ugly, repulsive and grotesque regions of the mind as if in a ritual necessary for the healing of the soul in the same way as, some psychologists affirm, the primeval cry is needed as the ultimate source of self-understanding. Here are two sample stanzas from her work:

I am the vomit of God — to be forgotten forever?
How calmly the flax of destiny piles up upon the spindle
And is suddenly pulled apart... Between tired fingers
I see, twisting and crawling, the stinking leeches of life.
Sun rises and sets... Darker the skies of the mind.
Oh, there, my star, my fata morgana, is shining!
In this hungry world, I am the most famished of all:
I wanted it all without end... and I touched — all there is.²⁰

Markas Zingeris (b. 1947) is still a different player. His games are sad and full of ancient Jewish wisdom as well as of bittersweet pain, gift of his people's recent destiny, both filtering through like a mournful light across the thin veil of reality. Sometimes, as in his collection *A Childhood Evening*,²¹ one feels in this sadness a certain civilized humor, that of a stoic, intelligent Jew who has bargained long with the Lord and who is now willing to acquiesce both to His gift of death and to the refuse of stereotypes the world has dumped on him. So he agrees to be a tailor:

Lord, give me wisdom
to meet death like a tailor would greet his client,
to measure him, cloth measure between my teeth,
to stitch his terrible sleeping-gown
and to see him off, bowing thrice by the threshold.

Could my heart endure such a wisdom?
Would not my mind break apart from such knowledge?
What craftsman is good with his hands even more so than death?
What Jew could be smarter than his dispossession?

Evening in Childhood, p. 7

Among other good poets, we might at least mention Kęstutis Rastenis (b. 1950), a contemplative poet listening for signs of truth to his inner silence in the heart, Vytautas Dubindris, interested in a sort of intertextuality of the human reality with the cosmic myth of Being, Vaidotas Daunys (1958), who is seeking similar connections with nature around him perceived as myth, and particularly Gražina Cieškaitė (1951) whose ultimate thematic dimension is history but who confronts it and the entire span of human experience with a well-constructed, sophisticated and sensitive system of images, so that the specific gravity in her art is definitely in art itself and not in whatever it may seem to serve. '

Lithuanian poetry has now definitely come of age, has understood itself and its relation to the nation. Consequently, it can now be read like any other poetry in the world beyond the former Curtain, without laudatory rhetoric about its "liberation," and it will yield as much wisdom and pleasure to any reader who seeks it, according to his or her measure of the heart and mind.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 See *Pergalė* (Victory), the official journal of the Lithuanian Writers' Union, No. 6, 1989, pp. 80-85. Juškaitis has just published a new book of verse, *Pučia vėjas į širdį* (The Wind Blows Into the Heart), Vilnius, Vaga, 1990, containing poems from the last three decades, where the civic sentiments, indignation with tyranny, speak with an absolutely dominant voice.
- 2 G. Patackas, *Išvarymas iš rojaus* (Exile From Paradise), 1981, pp. 58-85. See a brief discussion of this poem in R. Šilbajoris "Some Recent Baltic Poets: the Civic Duty to Be Yourself," in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. XX, No. 3, Fall, 1989, pp. 243-259. Due to the fact that Patackas' book came out still before perestroika, he may have opted for the metaphor of Chile in order to protect himself from the censors, still almost omnipotent at that time.
- 3 *Pergalė*, No. 7, 1989, p. 120.
- 4 Donaldas Kajokas, *Tylinčioje aidas* (The Echo of the Silent One), 1988, p. 136.
- 5 Julius Keleras, *Baltas Kalėdaitis* (Christmas Wafer), Poems. Chicago, The "Ateitis" Literary Foundation, 1990.
- 6 See, for instance, several of his poems in *Pergalė*, No. 10, 1990, pp. 72-76. Cinauskas spent fifteen years in Siberian concentration camps and has not, to date, published a single book of poems. He is one of the several remarkable poets much older in years than in the exercise of his poetic talents who have recently begun to appear in print as "younger poets."
- 7 *Pergalė*, No. 12, 1989, excerpts from the cycle "Hymns to Omega," pp. 3-6.
- 8 Vladas Braziūnas, "Pamatų alyvos" (Lilacs at the Foundations), *Pergalė*, No. 9, 1989, pp. 82-86.
- 9 Vytautas Bložė *Polifonijos* (Polyphonies). Vilnius, Vaga, 1981.
- 10 Vytautas P. Bložė, *Miko Kėdainišio laišakai sau pačiam ir kiti nežinomi rankraščiai rasti senų griūvančių mūrinių namų pastogėje* (The Letters of Mikas Kalėdiškis to Himself, and Other Unknown Manuscripts Found in the Attic of an old Decrepit House). Vilnius, Vaga, 1986.
- 11 Kornelijus Platelis, *Kruvinos Mišios* (Bloody Mass). Poema. *Pergalė*, No. 11, 1989, pp. 3-6.
- 12 See, for instance, R. Šilbajoris, "Time, Myth and Ethos in Recent Lithuanian Literature," *World Literature Today*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1986, p. 432-435.
- 13 Gintaras Patackas, *Amuletai*. Vilnius, Vaga, 1988, p. 2.
- 14 "Trys miežių saikai už dinarą," *Pergalė*, No. 8, 1989, p. 89.
- 15 *Tauridė*. Vilnius, Vaga, 1990.
- 16 *Parabolė* (Parabola), Vilnius, Vaga, 1984. Some excellent poems have also been recently published in *Pergalė*, No. 10, 1989, pp. 3-5.
- 17 Rolandas Rastauskas, *Albumas* (The Album), Vilnius, Vaga, 1989.
- 18 *Vilkolakiai* (Swamp Ghosts), Vilnius, Vaga, 1988. In addition to this late poetic debut, Juchnevičius also illustrates another recent trend in Lithuania — the crossing of boundaries between the arts. The sculptor Vytautas Mačiuika, for instance, has also recently begun writing verse.
- 19 *Pergalė*, No. 4, 1989, p. 71.
- 20 Onė Baliukonytė, "Of Everything...", *Pergalė*, No. 4, 1989, pp. 3-4.
- 21 Markas Zingeris, *Vakaras vaikystėje* (A Childhood Evening). Vilnius, Vaga, 1989.