

A NOTE ON OPPOSITIONAL DISCOURSES IN BARANAUSKAS'S *ANYKŠČIŲ ŠILELIS*

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Published in 1861, *Anykščių šilelis* (*The Forest Grove of Anykščiai*), marks the beginning of Lithuanian narrative poetry, a departure from relatively didactic works, such as Donelaitis's *Metai*. Still, critics continue to identify a strong bias in the poem rooted in a romantic tradition. If the poem continues to be identified as romantic it is only because historical forces have ended to center meaning that way. What I would like to point out is that a dialogical view of the poem, one which identifies oppositional and competing discourses, suggests that a single meaning, say, "romantic" or "pastoral", cannot be ascribed to the poem. Moreover, a dialogical view of the poem can illuminate additional complexities and begin to place it as one of the important works of the emerging modern period.

As one might expect from poems in the manner of European and Western romantic and pastoral traditions, one has to admit the overwhelming "presence" of Nature in *Anykščių šilelis*, especially as it manifests itself in the emotions, senses, and recollections of the poet:

The forest would your soul so merry make (1. 20)

or

With every scent the forest woos your nose (1. 24)

We can see like and strong "presences" of Nature in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century English poetry, for example, in Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." In Wordsworth's poem, after five years the poet returns and finds spiritual refreshment in the rustic and pastoral settings of the Lake District of England. Not only are Nature's "presences" felt in sensory ways by the poet, but it is assumed that even the removal of the flesh and blood poet from the rejuvenating environs of Nature are compensated for by the "presence" of Nature in the mind and memory of the poet; for example, in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the young poet recreates Nature from within his dismal dormitory room in the city. And though *Anykščių šilelis* is published a half-century after the English romantics thrived, in his introduction to the 1985 Vaga edition, poet and critic Edvardas Mieželaitis reinforces the obvious romantic influences on the poem. He cites "numerous instances of poetic transformations" of "this beautiful landscape pastoral" (45), and suggests that the poem is an imaginative escape for the young poet from the "pent up atmosphere of the seminary" (44).

So the "presence" of Nature in Baranauskas's poem is obvious, but this "presence" is centered by a long tradition in literature that characterizes Nature as pastoral and possessing restorative capabilities to the mind and soul of the poet. Yet what also makes Baranauskas's poem truly remarkable are the oppositional discourses of "presence" and "absence" - "absence" being a context that is not traditionally valued or interpreted. In fact, the poet announces this oppositional discourse in the very first lines of the poem:

Stump-littered hillocks, desolate and bare
Can anyone believe you were once fair? (11.1-2)

If one privileges the "presence" Nature in romantic verse, then the "once fair" nature of this pastoral place can be believed; yet Baranauskas's poem creates a crucial doubt ("Can anyone believe...?"), complicating the meaning of "presence" from the opening lines: "absence" competes with "presence" in the poem.

Mieželaitis of course does not suggest the poem is wholly romantic. Like the poet implies, Mieželaitis acknowledges that the destruction of the forest grove of Anykščiai is due to extrinsic factors. This further suggests the poem is not a romantic poem. At the time the poem was composed Lithuanian society was rapidly changing. The poem was first published just two years before the failed revolt of 1863 and during a period of vigorous Lithuanian nationalism. Still, these factors in the poem itself are "presence" themselves. And we know that what the poet laments in the poem are not things "present" but things "absent". Though one might argue that one tenet of romantic poetry is the (present) longing for a lost (absent) past, this interpretation does not account for the powerful and self-consciously indeterminate ending of the poem:

Unfinished is my lay, such pain at heart...
that force which gnawed the forest for so long...
curtails my song. (11. 339-42)

It is not surprising that the poet cannot finish his song. The tensions between "presence" and "absence" in the poem are irresolvable. While the matter of oppositional discourses concerning nature in the poem may be little more than a curiosity in light of the sweeping political changes in Lithuania in recent years, I believe this reading of the poem opens an important area of investigation. A dialogical view of the poem can create a palpable "absence" of Lithuanian political identity and suggest the struggle for it throughout the nineteenth century. For example, the following lines form the middle section of the poem link Lithuanian identity to the "absence" of sound:

For Lithuanians relish calm and ease...
We often weep in woods, not knowing why...
Such deep tranquility pervades the soul
This is the source from which our tears and sighs,
Our solace and our poetry arise. (11. 179; 182; 189; 191-92)

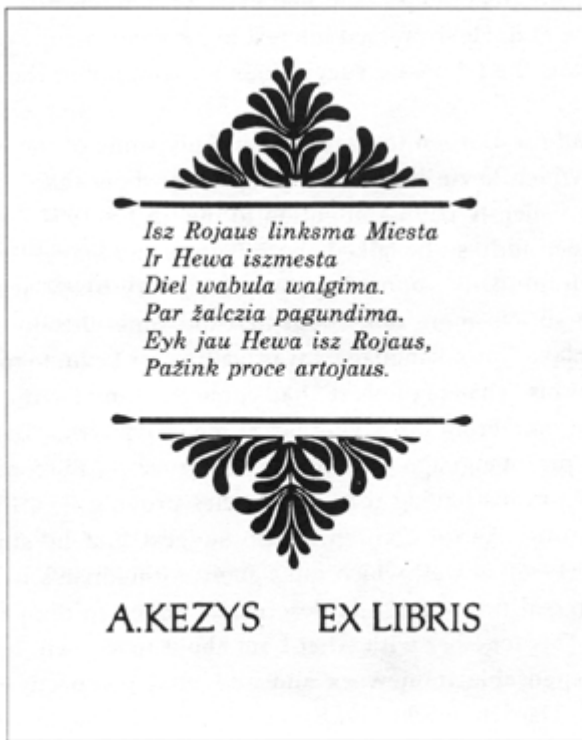
Baranauskas's poem is groundbreaking because its obvious treatment of "absence" opposing "presence" also suggests an opposition to the political "presence" of the Czarist regime established in 1795. Contrast the preceding lines with these near the end of the poem, when the "forester" has come, destroyed the grove, and

Lied to his superiors, and when people wept,
rammed fists down their throats, dunked them in a pool of blood* (11 333-34)

The poem's oppositions are clear in these instances: the "absence" of sound, in contrast with the "presence" of sound, which becomes dangerous: the loss of one's ability to "weep" or lament itself due to a fist "rammed... down their throats." It is this abrupt, violent, shocking loss of articulation, of the power of lament itself, the sudden conversion of sound to silence, that the poet himself laments when he "curtails" his song. The oppositional discourses of "presence" and "absence" and of "sound" and "silence" suggest that the poem is powerfully subversive. Its appearance in 1861 and its lasting appeal during the Soviet occupation in this century point to its critical role in the preservation and revival of Lithuanian cultural and political identity spanning two centuries.

WORKS CITED

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Wordsworth, William. *Selected Poems and Prefaces*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.



Vytautas O. Virkau, *Ex libris A. Kezys*, 1982

*Here I use a more literal translation of these lines by Danutė Janutienė, which emphasizes "throat" and the high degree of violence in these lines, e.g., "rammed fists" and "dunked them in a pool of blood."