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JUŠKAITIS' VISION OF HUMAN DESTINY

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Jonas Juškaitis is not a prolific writer, having published only three short poetry collections, including his first publication, *The Sunrises and the Sunsets*, which appeared in 1962. However, his creative output, albeit meager, presents a fairly complex philosophical vision of human destiny. While recognizing the literary value of his writing, critics in Lithuania avoid giving an in-depth analysis of the philosophical vision underlying his imagery. The reason for their reluctance may be the unorthodox flavor of Juškaitis' ideas. Asserting the primacy of brotherly love over ideals, he is ultimately in conflict with the official communist dogma that the victory of the proletariat has ascendancy over merely personal relations. That Juškaitis' poetry has even seen the light of day is perhaps due to its very complexity.

Though not devoid of emotion, Juškaitis' poetry is concerned primarily with getting at the philosophical meaning of an idea, rather than at its emotional burden. Critics have noted the joyful tone of the nature poems in his second collection, entitled *The Blue Violet Illumined our Destiny*, as well as the nostalgia and anguish in his poems on the human condition. However, Juškaitis' primary purpose in writing these poems is not that of expressing joy over the beauties of nature or anguish over the pain of human destiny. Rather, his purpose is that of philosophically illuminating human destiny by using the blue violet as a metaphor. We will therefore attempt to understand, or recreate, his philosophical vision of the meaning of human destiny.

In placing man at the center of being, Juškaitis aligns himself with the existentialists in opposition to the rationalistic view of the intelligibility of life. On the rationalist view, although life cannot embody the Ideal of the Good Life, it nevertheless has value and an intelligible purpose to the extent that it approaches this ideal as a goal. The striving to attain the goal of the good life is a rational striving, one which involves philosophically apprehending the goal and applying it to life. Just as the sun gives life to plants and animals, so, too, the Ideal of the Good Life gives all other ideas value and purpose. Once applied by man, these ideas in turn give value and purpose to life. Juškaitis seeks to undermine this vision of the intelligibility of life by asking the existentialist question "How can we be certain that we have arrived at the truth?" Ideals do not wear their truth on their sleeve, so to speak; therefore, it must be man himself who spontaneously creates his own values in the act of living. Thus, as he sees it, the question of the worthwhile life is not one which can be answered by philosophical reflection on ideals, and the measure of value is not the extent to which a life has attained these ideals. The fire of Plato's cave is not a source of illusion, nor is the sun in the Platonic heavens a source of truth.

Juškaitis attempts to capture this vision of the unbridgeable gap between life and the intelligible with the concept of yearning, man's desire for that which is not. The source of yearning is suffering, death, and the direction of yearning is ideals, the sky. Thus, Juškaitis writes, in "Yearning" ("Ilgesys," MŽ, 50):

. . . The three rue leaves

When plucked will wither —
From its scent will spring our yearning.

Yearning, always yearning!
Just like smoke —
In the heavens, silver of the water-wagtail,
It tries to make its nest
But can't. . .

When smoke rises, it seems to be headed toward some goal, but disappears before it ever gets there. Similarly, yearning rises to the sky of ideals, as if heading for the goal which will make life worth living. But nowhere does it find a satisfactory answer and is lost, never finding a home, or nest. In "Dust on Books" ("Dulkės ant knygu," MŽ, 101), the source of

yearning is seen to be nothingness and the fear of nothingness, and all the high-sounding ideals in philosophical books are said to be illusions created by the mind; therefore, they are not eternally valid truths. They are likened to the illusory gold color acquired by things in a flash of lightning. The yearning for a rational direction in life, being a hopeless desire, necessarily causes anguish. The theme of existential anguish is repeatedly to be found in Juškaitis' poems and gets a separate treatment in the poem "Anguish."

Whereas, in true existentialist fashion, the yearning for intelligibility is seen to lead to anguish, Juškaitis discovers another kind of yearning, one which brings joy and peace. This is the yearning which is directed to earth and can be likened to homesickness. Yearning redirected to earth is the theme of the poem "In the Ploughland." Towards the end of the poem Juškaitis writes about the rapidly falling dusk:

Already paths have been rendered meaningless by night.
(MŽ, 22)

This sets the existentialist mood of complete freedom and at the same time abandonment. Then he continues:

Burning, a heavenly rock falls through
The corona, dragging its fiery tail.
On that side the walls flash into the glow
Yearningly, it follows the solar disk,
The heart remains, illumined by it,
And its desires — without bounds, and earth —
As if it were the core of being In the reality of sweating work.

The star has fallen to the earth and has thereby redirected yearning, making the earth the new center of all being. A more detailed statement of this yearning redirected to earth can be found in "Sky-Elegy:"

Worldwise. Galaxies shine, surrounding earth-dramas on all sides.
The dark yellows like a forest, yellow nests swirl before my eyes.
Lo, like a path leading back a meteor lighting-flashes into the moon
In the stillest stillness. And I emerge from the tangled fires, oh night, oh starry tree:
I long for the sounding of the quail-tongue to the harvest-god on the last morn of summer,
For the golden silence of red bayberries on the water, above which the sea-gull trembles like an aspen leaf,
For beasts with landscapes in their eyes, for a castle-mound, angular as a diamond,
And for a field — there the bronze flax clangs in the stained-glass sunrise.

Juškaitis is writing as if from the vantage point of the stars. Earth has become the new sun or object of yearning. Contrast this with the last stanza of "Brueghel" ("Breigelis"):

Another climbs up to God knows where . . . Heavens!
He perches like a bat on a wall
Above the human ant-hill — watches
The old brick painted a mournful hue
By the glow.
I wonder, won't his head
Get dizzy, looking down at earth?
(MŽ, 52)

The higher vantage-point is detrimental to the person in the second poem because his yearning is still directed to the sky, the other world — possessed by the desire for intelligibility and unable to find any certainties, he considers living to be a meaningless scurrying about. True joy can be achieved in man when the object of yearning becomes earth. In this process the earth is transformed from a place of meaningless suffering to a home, what Juškaitis calls a "landscape with a household spirit" ("Natiurmortas su namų dvasia," first section of MŽ).

It is this theme of earth as a home which I believe to be a key to understanding Juškaitis' poetry. In childhood, earth, despite suffering, is cherished as a home, but ". . . the nights waft stars into our eyes like seeds . . ." ("Sky-Elegy") and we become homeless. This loss of a home prevents us from finding true happiness. Our destiny is truly like the violet. The violet is so small and grows so close to the earth, that it is often unnoticed and unappreciated. Life on earth, too, often goes unappreciated. Learning to cherish life brings peace and joy, but at the same time it brings sadness, for life is finite. As Juškaitis puts it, "I sing because I want to, I cry because I want to." (The title of the second section in MŽ).

The theme of earth as a home and yearning as homesickness gives philosophical depth to Juškaitis' joyful nature poems. Roughly, Juškaitis sees a harmony in Nature which results in life, peace, and joy. He sets up an analogy between the harmony in nature and a possible harmony in man. It is the loss of this harmony which prevents man from achieving true happiness in life.

Juškaitis expresses the harmony of Nature in terms of a harmony between sky and earth. This harmony results in the green and life of Spring. The opening lines of "April" ("Balandis"), state this theme:

The birds in chainlets and the galazies
United . . .
(MŽ, 8)

The poem goes on to express in various ways the essential synthesis and unity of earth and sky. The sky is said to be green, and yellow moonbeams are likened to pollen of willow blossoms. The call of peewits creates forests in the night sky. Moonlight, white as jasmine blossoms, sows seeds in the silver frost. And a vapor rises from the drying-house to the very clouds, sleepless angels. The poem ends expressing the hope of coming life:

Nature will emerge from its cocoon
A green-hued butterfly — like a hallelujah

The theme of "Waters of Spring" ("Pavasario vandenys, MŽ, 9), is the life-giving power of water awakened by rays of light. The poem ends by pointing out that this power of water should remind us of the difference between altar-smoke and hearth-smoke. It is at the hearth, not at the altar, that man can achieve that harmony which is the source of true happiness.

This harmony in Nature is but an analogy for a corresponding harmony in man. Though the former can serve to illuminate the latter, the two exist at different levels of reality. In "Friendship" ("Draugystė"), Juškaitis describes the harmony caused by friendship:

Now together they! be happy —
The fatigue of things upon our hands,
The pathways of our feet, the labor of our hands,
The fire which is with us, — and
Its flame miraculously wraps itself
Into a ball now.

The days will keep repeating one by one
With the same old things, mere shadows — they will err...
Exactly where our skulls shall lie,
Will be the center of the earth.
(MŽ, 15)

Human friendship, like Nature, has its own ball of fire and, indeed, its own reality. This is the reality of Hearth-Earth, where man resides in body and spirit, cherishing it as his own home and the home of his fellow human beings.

Insofar as one has lived, worked, and suffered, one has shaped and maintained Hearth-Earth, man's home. Visible signs of man's caring for his home are the ploughlands, the fields of grain, and bread. Even architecture is a visible sign of man's continuing effort to "make earth intimate" ("Snake Dance"), i.e., to make it a home. The images of bread and grain are central to those poems which depict humanity as a family. Christ's sacrifice is mentioned as a supreme example of caring in the poem "Psalm to Bread" ("Duonos psalmė," MŽ, 70): "During one metamorphosis of rye and man the earth moaned." It is in its aspect as maintaining a household for a family of men and women that work and suffering become noble and purposeful. Juškaitis writes:

You don't know how important
A destiny you give to men,
With your labor, even though
It will determine you.
("Those Special Days," AŽ, 12)

It would therefore not be misleading to say that Juškaitis replaces the rationality of Plato's Ideal of the God Life with the spontaneity of Christian love (without its theistic implications).

Critics have noted Juškaitis' careful and persistent use of color to highlight his underlying ideas. In true impressionistic fashion, he creates his own logic of color. Thus, for example, he mixes color-categories, as in "green moon" and "red city," and applies color to abstract entities, as in "silver present" and "golden hymn." The resulting logic is more conceptual than emotional. Thus, for example, although yellow is a joyful color, it is even more significant, for Juškaitis' purposes, that it is the color of the life-giving sun. Green is often said to be the color of hope, but it is also the color of new life in Nature. In "Stillness" ("Tyla"), Juškaitis writes:

I dreamt: forever I will be
Stillness of the hue of Nature . . .
I awoke, — and those dreams —
Were like a wreath upon my head.
(MŽ, 118)

Juškaitis is concerned in this poem with the problem of the meaning of death. Contrary to what a superficial reading of these lines might suggest, he is not a nature-worshipper: he would not feel joy at the thought that, in destroying human life, death destroys all that was human in that life, leaving only that which is an aspect of Nature. To understand his real meaning, we must keep in mind that "the hue of Nature as a synthesis of sky and earth, has, in Juškaitis' poetry, an analogue on the level of human reality. This analogue is "Hearth-Earth" or "landscape with a household spirit." Thus, Juškaitis is saying that death does not imply complete destruction of that which is human, for it has no power over Hearth-Earth, which endures in the hearts and minds of men. This is, of course, a denial of personal immortality, but it expresses a hope that men will continue to be inspired by and will continue to cherish that which alone has made life meaningful for those who have died — earth, the home of man.

Indeed, not only is death powerless over what is essentially human in our lives, but also its sting is removed by the realization that the act of dying, though not freely chosen, can have a human purpose. It can help others cope with the fact of death and can teach them to redirect their love to earth. Juškaitis writes:

. . . The wind
Of death blows into the generation which had sheltered us.
We gather into our spirit
The tragic light from its eyes
Like the scent of withering grass.
Our turn comes to shelter a generation.
How the dear departed draw earth closer!
("As I Lay on My Death-Bed" ("Kai gulėjau mirties patale"), MŽ, 59).

With this vision of Earth as the center of the universe and Nature lovingly shaped by man into a home for his brothers and sisters, Juškaitis can face death with a peace approaching joy, as if death were a well-deserved rest. This is why he completes his collection *"The Blue Violet Illumined Our Destiny"* by writing:

... Lie down —
Around your head
The happy rye in green magnificent
Rhythm swayed with joy
Beneath the star-swirls
In a mournful light.