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Liūnė Sutema: The Protective Stance

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Abstract

Liūnė Sutema (Zinaida Nagytė-Katiliškienė) and Algimantas Mackus represent the generation of Lithuanian post-World-War-Two émigré poets who rejected the romantic nostalgia popular in émigré literature and created a poetic language they themselves called “unornamented”. Having lost home and homeland, they viewed themselves as the “dispossessed” and their poetry is colored by the tragic experiences of war and exile. Yet critics were quick to point out that unlike Mackus, Sutema did not succumb to nihilism but tried to transcend her existential angst by assuming personal responsibility and extending her own self to serve others and protect them.

At the end of the World War II, Lithuanian poets who fled Soviet re-occupation and political repressions in Lithuania and eventually reached the United States, Canada, and Australia, retained a very strong relationship with their lost homeland. Poetic interpretations of the philosophical concept of a homeland were central in the work of such already acclaimed poets as Bernardas Brazdžionis, Kazys Bradūnas, Henrikas Nagys and several others. For them, the Lithuanian landscapes they created signified the hope of return and were thus analogous to the biblical paradise. Younger Lithuanian exile poets, the so-called second generation, were also preoccupied with the theme of the homeland, but in their perception the native country was no longer a place of hope but rather a country lost, a non-existent land, a no-land. They called themselves “the dispossessed” (nužemintieji)¹ people stripped of land, of their country. Best known among them are Algimantas Mackus (1932-1964) and Liūnė Sutema (born in 1927).

In the context of Lithuanian émigré poetry, it is not surprising that these two poets who appeared to have so much in common received a great deal of critical comparisons. Based on the tragic historical cataclysms they had just experienced, they shared an equally tragic poetic worldview and a disbelief in the possibility of a harmonious existence. “Their poetry abounds in images of drought, rain, and snow (...), an equally unmitigating perception of the reality of exile, a similar atmosphere of threat, a nightmarish mood of evil and of nothingness, and the unrelenting presence of death.”² Yet, literary critics soon discovered that despite their similarities, Liūnė Sutema’s worldview reflects a marked difference from that of Mackus.³ What then is so uniquely different in Liūnė Sutema’s poetic writing?

In Algimantas Mackus’ poetry, the loss of his homeland turns him into an alienated human being (he is not a son but at best an adopted son, a foster child). Alienated land is barren. In T. S. Eliot’s poetry and in biblical contexts, barren land, wilderness, has demonic connotations. The poet himself becomes sterile. His prayer, his litanies spring from the despair of having lost God and a desperate striving to make the world harmonious even though he knows that it is impossible to restore “circles” – perfect, divine forms.

In Mackus’s poetry, the experiences of tragic unnatural death (such as war and genocide) and the overall omnipotence of death create a prism through which normal living is seen as an impossibility, “the foster child’s last supper.”⁴ One turns to God, but one finds lifeless stained-glass images, barren angels and saints (“homosexual angels,” “lesbian Theresas”). One prays in one’s desperation without expectation of being heard. The fairy-tale metaphor of the “glass coffin” (the sleeping princess) implies biblical resurrection, but resurrection is “retracted” and death remains “unconquered.” This repudiates the

biblical promise that the “last enemy to be defeated will be death” (1 Cor 15, 26) as well as the rephrasing by Dylan Thomas that “death shall have no dominion.”

The image of a mutilated body symbolizes this impossibility (“Chapel B”). Tragic death is ugly: thus the rhythmical repetition of the leitmotif “I don’t want to see...”. Yet, at the same time, the refusal to see encompasses minute collage-like descriptions of shredded bodies: faces like “splitting branches”, “torn wrists”, “squashed legs.” ⁵ Thus, paradoxically, the professed denial of death turns on a deeper level into the opposite: the craving to see, to scrutinize, i.e. almost a death wish. The tragic aspects of existence which overwhelm Mackus’s poetic imagination are both repelling and desirable, forming the very core of his worldview.

In other words, Mackus’ lyrical subject sees catastrophe as unavoidable and finally submits to this worldview of inescapable doom. Revolt against death is juxtaposed with humble submission. The poetic subject “pleads” (ironically) and pleads (literally) for a catastrophe: for “sharp blows of fate,” for “a quick loop of moonlight,” for “a black collision with the divine mass.” ⁶

While Algimantas Mackus uses his poetic talent to accentuate multiple layers of tragic modern existence, Liūnė Sutema takes a different direction by attempting to transcend the tragedy of being without surrendering to despair and to find new possibilities of hope in a universe of broken hopes. Liūnė Sutema’s woman derives the core of her strength from her concern for the needs of others rather than hear concern for herself. When she says “don’t be afraid” or “don’t shiver,” it is not because she is so strong that she can offer such support (which she is not) but because she gains her strength from helping someone else attain peace of mind and deliverance from existential angst. We find such a willingness to extend herself even in her earliest collection *Nebėra nieko svetimo* (Nothing is alien anymore).

In the poetry by Liūnė Sutema, the same motif of “no-man’s-land” (*Niekieno žemė*), thus an alien, menacing territory, and the un-alive poetic word denote a break in the link between the verbal and the existential worlds. In this fragmented worldview, an abyss opens up between verbal and nonverbal worlds: “The words I carry around are objectless / the words I carry around are nameless.” ⁷

Traditional rhetoric is unable to reach “an oppressed soul.” In this context the soul remains “illiterate” in its solitude. Liūnė Sutema creates modern variations of the biblical Cain as a soul “not-spoken-to” by Abel how Abel lost his brother by failing to talk to him. ⁸

For Liūnė Sutema, the devaluation of language becomes a creative impulse: the lyrical subject searches for the right word, for the lost identity, and creates a variety of identities, a variety of forms of existence in the world (“I pass as...”). Sutema creates a generic link between litany and incantation. The litany-like repetition of a theme brings order to the unrestrained flow of speech and enables positive assertion: “May you become...”, “may the dawn come...”, “let it darken...”. The magic implied in an incantation gives power to the word. The sphere of witches and fairies is connected with the power to cast human destinies through the power of words. Evil has both demonic (denoted by the apocalyptic image of the Beast) and human aspects and is a creation of personal determination: “They knew what they were doing [...], I know what I am doing...” (an inversion of the biblical text: “Forgive them, Father! They don’t know what they are doing,” Lk 23, 34). In this poetic situation, the convention of prayer is transformed into antiprayer: “I don’t want to be atoned / Lord, do not forgive.” ⁹ In accordance with the philosophical tenets of Existentialism, absolute freedom of choice is declared and thus absolute personal responsibility as well. ¹⁰

The woman in Liūnė Sutema’s poetry finds herself in a metaphysical sphere where she must face the demonic Beast and like the early Christians in the Roman Coliseum is determined to win the mortal battle by professing her belief in “Humanity and Life”P:

I'll surrender nothing,
I'll deny having it,
I will hide it inside myself,
safeguard it in catacombs,
for the endgame to be mine ...
so that loud and clear
in the language of perseverance
I shall reiterate my faith
in humanity and life. ¹¹

Love is placed in opposition to death: the image of the female “carrying inside her” assumes a wide symbolic meaning of preserving and protecting everything that is precious through her determination to win this struggle with death. Poetic consciousness emerges from the tension between the concepts of “I am” and “if I am.” In *Tebūnie tarytum pasakoj* (Be it as in a fairy tale) such metaphors as “bridge” or “shadow” offer possible identities. “To be” means to integrate, to harmonize, to safeguard from death.

Yet, despite her concern for others, Liūnė Sutema's woman remains free, isolated, "untamed". Viktorija Daujotytė calls her "the most northern of Lithuanian women poets, a true descendant of northern Baltic tribes," and sees a link between the "northernness" of Sutema's poetic worldview and poetic form: "Liūnė Sutema never wrote [...] simple rhymed verse ..., she did not subordinate herself to canons of genre or versification"¹²

In our modern worldview, the concept of hope may be twofold: rigid, artificially constructed hopefulness ignoring aspects of reality that can diminish it, or hopefulness opened up to all the disruptive winds of reality and acknowledging that which IS. It is this second type which can be found in Liūnė Sutema's poetry: hope to strive for, a "minus-hope" because it is not possible "to lock up the world ... in a matchbox / and hyde it safely – / as in childhood."¹³

In the poetic interpretation of her reality, not even a guardian angel can fulfill the task of safeguarding: "Nesaugojo jis manęs..." (He failed to safeguard me...). In this poem the woman reverses the roles: it is she who protects her angel, refers to him mockingly as her "timid, cautious guardian."¹⁴ In the otherwise bleak and desolate landscape of her imagination, Liūnė Sutema's poetic "I" takes it upon herself to fill the abyss with love and even hope. In the poem "Evening Oozes into Town" from the cycle "Tikrovė" (Reality), the town is well-guarded, but is it safe?

Hide your head in my arms,
do not fear –
It will pass...
The town is well guarded:
an angel with a trumpet,
David with the slingshot,
Don Quixote and his lance,
all of them are guarding us.
Soon it will be totally dark –
soon it will be lazily still – ¹⁵

Poetic meaning is expressed in the tension between two opposite poles. "Everything will pass" is both a motif of comforting (the danger threatening the town will pass) and of the final passing, the ultimate end of life-death. The words "darkness" and stillness can imply a restful night but they can also connote death.

It may strike one as surprising that the three characters chosen as the town's guardians -- an angel, the biblical David (still a shepherd, not yet a king), and Don Quixote – are according to our present worldview quite incapable of offering protection. However, in situations of metaphysical evil, it is precisely such childlike, angelic, donquixotic guardians who can offer safety because they subscribe to a value system that is an inversion of evil.

The above cycle questions the notion of reality as one unified concept. Instead, the poet creates multiple possibilities of reality. In Liūnė Sutema's poetic worldview there is the reality of the day (as experienced by most of us) as well as a uniquely individual, personal reality. The archetypal image of the moon has strong female connotations. In Lithuanian grammar, the moon is masculine but in Liūnė Sutema's poetic worldview, the isotope of the full moon and night is linked with the female figure. Individual, private female reality is expressed through the motif of sleepwalking.¹⁶ The woman feels at home only in the reality of the night: she is free, playful, even coquettish; she steps lightly over roofs, she plays hide-and-seek, lets herself fall into "safe" fog. She wants to relinquish her responsibilities for others and playfully tries to push her shadow into a star carriage and let it go:

I am tired of watching over you,
you keep stumbling under the wheels,
of cars and trains,
You have lost control...
Take my starry umbrella and go.
I have had enough of suicides and murders.
I will even get you a chandelier of stars
To light your way,
Just go!¹⁷

The feeling of hopefulness, however, is intertwined with the sense of temporality, existential angst: success in protecting someone is a gift of grace, a gift that exists in the present, in the here and now ("one more time," "once more"), without knowl

12 edge of what is yet to come. In the same poem she rejoices that "once more everybody is safe, / that all are still together."¹⁸ The morning dawn flows like milky foam: "Let's drink, let our lips stick with sweet milk-white foam."

The image of milk-white foam points to the Lithuanian mythological tale *Eglė, Queen of the Serpents* and Lithuanian readers know that this seemingly happy fairy tale ending carries within it the knowledge of death and disaster. In the tale, Eglė had to call her husband, king of the sea, with the incantation: "Žilvine, Žilvinėli! If you are alive, you will come as milk-

white foam, if you are dead, the foam will be blood-red!” Because of betrayal, her husband is killed, and the milk-white foam turns blood-red. In the context of the tale, the image of sweet milk-white foam contains connotations of blood and murder. Nevertheless, the reader is invited to enjoy the “happy ending,” however temporary, with the full knowledge that there is no guarantee for the future. “Once more everyone is saved” means not only “that everybody is still [physically] alive” (i.e. has been granted more time), but also that the poet still retains faith in humanity and life.

In Liūnė’s poetry, the female figure tends to be linked with the folkloric “sister of two brothers,”¹⁹ with an image of Antigone: “I am forever burying those I love most”²⁰ (Death is not ahead, death is here – “Mirtis neateina, ji čia”), with mythological fairies and witches. In the desolate landscape of Badmetis (Famine), the good fairy, though blighted herself, can still offer some consolation: “the hair of the good fairy/ hides you from wind and birds.”²¹

Placing the traditional concept of caring and protecting into the context of archetypal situations, Liūnė Sutema adds a universal dimension to individual experience. The traditional meaning of protecting is rewritten by Liūnė Sutema in the context of our contemporary life. In the Lithuanian language, as mentioned before, “žemė” means “land”, and “nužeminti” means “to be made land-less” but also “to humiliate”, “degrade.” The same term “nužeminti” also has a political meaning. People who were repressed by the Soviet regime and had their lands nationalized called themselves “nužemintieji”, i.e. “the land-less.” According to Vytautas Kavolis, one concrete experience of exile can thus symbolize universal dispossession and degradation and be of significance to everyone.²² Applied to Lithuanian exiles, to lose one’s land and to experience political exile both indicate a deeply dramatic aspect of human existence: an existential humiliation.

1. In the Lithuanian language, “žemė” means “land”; “nužeminti” means “to be made land-less” but also “to humiliate,” “debase.”

2. Rimvydas Šilbajoris, “Liūnės Sutemos žemėje”, *Liūnė Sutema, Poezijos rinktinė*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1992, 180. Note: all citations are from the same title. Translations by the translator.

3. Ibid., 163-182; Viktorija Daujotytė, “Liūnė Sutema”, *Viktorija Daujotytė, parašyta moterų*, Vilnius: Alma Litera, 2001.

4. Algimantas Mackus, *Ir mirtis nebus nugalėta* (And death shall have dominion). Vilnius: 1994. 127.

5. Ibid., 159.

6. Ibid., 147.

7. *Mano atsineštiniai žodžiai / nebeturi daiktų, / mano atsineštiniai daiktai nebeturi vardų* –, Sutema, 96.

8. *Kaip Abelis brolių prarado / nepakalbinęs jo*. Ibid., 88.

9. *Nenoriu būt atpirkta; Viešpatie, neatleisk*. Ibid., 145.

10. Dalia Čiočytė, *Biblija lietuvių literatūroje*. Vilnius: 1999, 189-191.

11. *N i e k o n e a t i d u o s i u / užsiginsiu, kad turiu. / Savyje išnešiosiu, / katakombose išsaugosiu, / kad m a n o būty žaidimo pabaiga – [...][kad] galėčiau aiškiai ir garsiai / išpažinti atkaklių kalba, / kad vis dar tebetikiu, / Žmogumi ir Gyvenimu*. Sutema, 72.

12. Daujotytė, op. cit.

13. *“Pasaulį uždaryti / degtukų dėžutėje / ir saugiai paslėpti – kaip vaikystėje...”*. “Bijau,” (I am afraid), Sutema, 153-156.

14. “Angelas sargas” (Guardian Angel), Ibid., 61.

15. *...paslėpki veidą mano glėby / ir nebijoki – / viskas praeis – / Nebijoki, / apstatytas miestas sargybom: / angelas su trimitu, / Dovydas su laidykle, / Don Kichotas su ietim / saugoja mus – / Greitai bus visai tamsu – Greitai bus tingiai ramu.”* Ibid., 121.

16. “*Naktį vaikštau stogų briaunom*” (Nights I walk on roof edges). Ibid., 125.

17. *Įstumiu savo šešėlį į Grižulo Ratus / ir šaukiu: – važiuok, / nusibodo man saugot tave! / Tu vis krenti po traukinių / ir automobilių ratais, / tu pusiausvyros nebeturi! / Pasiimk / mano žvaigždėtą skėtį / ir važiuok, / jau man gana, savižudžių ir nužudytų... / Nukabinsiu tau dar Sietyną / ir pašviesiu, tik važiuok!* Ibid.

18. “*dar kartą visi išsaugoti, / visi tebėra – . Atsigerkim, / tesulimpa lūpos / saldžia pieno puta*”. Ibid., 122.

19. Ibid., 65.

20. “*...laidoju ir laidoju / artimiausius savus.*” Ibid., 149.

21. “*...gerosios laumės plaukai / nuo vėjo ir paukščių dengia tave?*” Ibid., 139.

22. Vytautas Kavolis, *Žmogus istorijoje*, Vilnius, 1994, 70.