

THE RADICAL PROJECT IN LITHUANIAN ÉMIGRÉ LITERATURE

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I

The tension at the core of the movement of consciousness which émigré Lithuanian culture since 1944 represents is crystallized in the terms *liberation* and *identification*.

One of the key terms in this system — liberation — is already evident in independent Lithuania. But then it largely meant the emancipation of individual subjectivity from the constraints of either religious tradition or the demands of an increasingly bourgeois society. In exile the drama of liberation becomes a surrealist cosmology or an existential metaphysics,

The other key term — identification — acquires an entirely new vitality in émigré culture. The universe of shared assumptions, or reliable shapes of humanity, of continuity, and of the very meaning of words, had to break down, in the course of occupations, genocides, and exile, — and the movements of Western thought which have preceded and followed them — for the question of what one affirms in oneself as one's own essential nature to become posed in radical depth. In Lithuanian history of consciousness the system described as liberation and identification emerges first in exile.

In Western consciousness bipolar systems allow (or the possibility of choosing sides and require fighting wars aimed at the suppression of an alternative. This has tended to be the position of Lithuanian émigré writers who have conceived their task as a program of identification — as a deeper understanding of that which they already were, as a consecration of themselves. The major poetic achievement of this conservative creative program is a synthesis of history, nature, and Baltic mythology- (This synthesis has, at a later stage, influenced some Soviet Lithuanian writers, who — especially Sigitas Geda — have been even more successful at it.)

There is hardly any sense for the opposite tendency — liberation — in the conservative program of émigré Lithuanian writers. This indeed helps explain the early creative exhaustion of even the best of them.

It is an outstanding peculiarity of the *radical* program in Lithuanian émigré culture that the thrust toward liberation becomes so deep that it activates a need for a profound reconsideration of identity as well. Identification becomes a creative problem precisely for the liberationists.

II

In the poetry of Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, The liberation-identification dialectic becomes evident at the earliest date and is most radically investigated. Its manifestations can be looked for in at least four frameworks, in relating to the home, to the religious universe, to world culture, and in the evolution of the mode of human activity.

Departure from home begins with the first signs of an independent consciousness in childhood and is motivated by the spirit of restless quest which it awakens. Political exile, which occurs later, is an accidental element of this process and only intensifies the general experience which for Nyka began to find poetic expression as early as 1938.

Departure from home opens up both a "deep wound" in the heart and the endless horizons of "several autumnal worlds of one's own". "As if searching for meaning" in these worlds, one "begins To be unaccountably sad".¹ Liberation coincides with sadness. And one's identity is rooted in this sadness.

What started out (and remains) a pervasive sadness is later understood as sin. One has not been deprived of one's historical home by an intrusive force [as the conservatives are content to interpret their loss], one has abandoned the obligations of relationship with the generative matrix of one's consciousness. Departure is a sin in Paul Ricoeur's sense, a failure of personal responsiveness — not to God, as for Ricoeur, but to the voices (human and natural) of one's childhood.

The identity of 'the man who has liberated himself from the confining horizons of his origin remains rooted in the guilt of unfaithfulness to the personal meanings out of which he has originated

Modernity means that one is always leaving that which one loves. One returns home only when there is nothing left there to love, in order, exhausted, to die.²

The departure continues. Even in 1977:

I am leaving home,
Though I still have not learned
The language of returning.³

III

While "home" is composed, for Nyka, of natural phenomena with the emotions of human beings and human beings with the bodies of natural phenomena ("wooden man", "cloud-like eyes and face", the "river" murmuring "in my body")⁴ the *religion universe* consists of significant ideas of which, in the final analysis, remain only two: God and man.

The religious universe is the realm of ultimate illusions—"the poisoning illusions of Rebellion and Truth" — which the life of man derives its significance, its longing 'or the Unattainable. But this significance becomes active in man's life only through his (and, at least in one instance, her) struggle against the forms in which the ultimate illusions present themselves. It is the human residue of the significant illusions that requires one to struggle against their forms (and to "kill" them) — not in public, but where one loves them, in one's own heart.⁵

The inherited religious universe is built on a command-and-refusal relationship: *God* "will command [us]. . . to live eternally without the earthly Restlessness and Pain", and *man* cannot be himself without the "powerful flames of Creation and Truth" — and his own "eternal freedom" — for the sake of which he renounces God's eternity.⁶

Christ is viewed in the manner of the Romantic revolutionaries: not as an embodiment of God, but as the legitimator of man's struggle. "Christ has told the oppressed slaves: 'Rebel' ", "his eternal fellow- traveler God" had to send death to Christ "to bring home the son who has strayed after an illusion . . . , " *But* Christ collects his playthings, "drunk with the illusion to be alive", and, "in painful doubt," — becoming real by this doubt — chooses mortality as his "one *and* final victory."⁷

God may be read as a metaphor for the obligatory tradition; Christ — for the rebellious energy. But the rebellious energy does not save. In the presence of the "naked" Christ man discovers that "there is neither birth nor resurrection any more".⁸ One must rebel in the tragical mode, without the progressive optimism of the nineteenth century.

There is a contradiction, as in Georg Simmel's analysis of the tragedy of culture, between cultural forms — "ideas" — and the "life stream." "Our quotidianity is to be crucified for this", for "swimming in one's own life stream," for "praying" with "the melody of existence" to "mother elemental nature".⁹ Thinking must be resistance against the system in whose categories one thinks. That the system will take revenge in depriving the rebel of The rewards which allow it to command — sober mystics have always known.

Within the religious realm, the identity of the liberated individual is grounded in a living toward death, the knowledge of "meaningless pain" as one's fate,¹⁰ which he sadly but firmly accepts, not as the wages of sin, but as the condition of any serious assertion of one's independence. (Sin arises from unfaithfulness to the ordinary phenomena of life — to nature; whereas, punishment comes from disobedience to established authority).

One grew into the loss of one's natural home. One decides to become a cosmic existentialist. This is a more advanced stage of one's life-cycle, one is more mature and chooses, like Prometheus, knowing the punishment, and one's life continues as that choice.

IV

Nyka's problematics of homelessness and the metaphysical struggle have acquired their basic character while he was still a young man living in his own country. Emblematic of his responses to *world culture* is a pair of poems devoted to cities he has directly encountered only during his exile. In "Tübingen 1945" an alien culture (alien in the sense of having an objective existence outside of one's home and one's religious universe) is experienced as a strange beauty with which one fully fuses. "And I called you Caroline von Schlegel, / Walking with you on Hauff street". We were "intoxicated by the strange fragrance" of "a wild flower plucked from Hölderlin's grave".[11](#)

In postwar Tübingen, world culture liberates by its strange beauty. But the Tübingen's, of one's youth do not endure. Either we discover a personal nightmare in the beauty itself, or, in the course of what might be described as the "normal" historical development of our times, we move from Tübingen to New York, from Romanticism to contemporary culture.

In the poem entitled "New York" (written in 1957), world culture, which twelve years ago had *fused* harmoniously with one's longings, is *destroying* them.

Your streets, infinite and empty,
Insinuate themselves into the brain and with their
longings reach
The most distant continents . . .
the gods depart . . .
In the intoxication of your colossi die nations large
and small,
....People . . .
Having lost their place in the cosmos and in themselves.
Wonderful
Is to them the dust of Brooklyn streets!
The city-illusion! The city without homes! . . .
A monument
To the power and beauty of the brutal principle
of life.
Wide-opened eyes and scream; a monument
To the dead world, which is we.[12](#)

The equations have changed. Where world culture, in its Romantic guise, has meant the life-giving power of the memorable dead, it now means, in the contemporary metropolis, the identity-extinguishing power of the nameless living: everyone is ground down, by "the brutal principle of life" embodied in the American city, into energetic dust. One may only wonder if the destructive energy of contemporary culture does not represent a later stage of the rebellious energy of Prometheus-Christ (or at least one of its directions, technologically narrowed and depersonalized).

While world culture as a strange beauty liberating one from the confinements of one's origins invited the young man, in deep longing to fuse with it, world culture now perceived as a destructive energy moves the more mature individual to return, in spiritual pain and in sensuous innocence, to that in his own depths—the particularity of memories — which resists this destruction.

To our selves we can no longer return.[13](#) But we have in us the vital language of our losses ("by losing/The world is created").[14](#)

What is genuine in the culture of modern man consists of the transpositions of his losses into the symbols of his being. For such symbols one must search everywhere, and the quest requires the most intense imaginative efforts of a lifetime. But they are symbols not of everything, but of what we are no longer.

World culture as aesthetic liberation, one's own memory as mystical grounding.

V

Changes in the mode of *human activity* connect all components of a life into a coherent story (to the extent that such a story is, in the face of modernity, at all possible).

In his early writings Nyka displays an attraction to history-making action. "But I was Columbus. I was the king of Sparta. The emperor in his triumphal carriage"[15](#) — probably images of The bringer of light, the hero of the history of

consciousness, but an actor in the production of nevertheless.

But all the works of history are routinized, or collapse into emotional insignificance, or are eroded by "the diligent moth"¹⁶ as soon as they have been made. What man makes remains radically insufficient for man.

In his later writings, Nyka increasingly asserts that what remains when history collapses into insignificance is immersion in moments of nature.

History against nature:

Therefore I write

My *Enchiridion Epicteti*:

Affirming that morning comes

Even in defeat, that dew

Is purer than the blood of heroes,

That eternity is for us

To stand on a June morning

On a stone in a river.¹⁷

This is the final homecoming of man: he has departed from nature—the home of his origins—and he returns to nature—his more general home. In his voyage from particular nature (and the guilt which departure provokes) to universal nature (and the tranquility that immersion provides) — man, in his European guilt and in his Chinese tranquility, understands his true identity as a conscious detail of multi-layered nature,

In the original unfaithfulness of consciousness, "my nature" dies and is transformed into a "coffin of metaphors",¹⁸ In the final wisdom of consciousness, "the earth has become for us the sign of resurrection,"¹⁹ This is not only the trajectory of consciousness of a poet, but perhaps a description of what happens to consciousness in the course of its modernization (or at least of its Western modernization) generally.

VI

In perpetually inadequate sociological terms, key elements of Nyka's poetry arise as efforts to comprehend the experienced problems of rural-urban migration, the questioning of traditional faith, ambivalence toward modern culture, and disillusionment with history (even with the history of consciousness)—universal aspects of cultural modernization all.

But for the conscious individual these social experiences (all of which political exile has only more sharply brought out) are transposed into timeless intellectual tensions inherent in the condition of the human being in nature, in history, and in imagination (and in his own life-cycle), and constituted in a language of simultaneous equations of "coffins of metaphors" and "signs of resurrection"—Fredric Jameson would perhaps reduce them to ideology and utopia—in which "The only unknown is I."²⁰

VII

Émigré experience can deflect from everything other than one's own pain, rhetoric, and vanity. In the radical project of Lithuanian émigré writers, this experience has strengthened our grasp of the human dynamics of the modernization of culture, the civilizational process in which we are all located. Therein lies its enduring significance.

1 Praradimo Simfonijos (1946), p 25

2 Op cit., pp 9-10.

3 Žiemos teologija (1985), p 64.

4 Praradimo simfonijos, pp, 94, 112, 42.

5 Praradimo simfonijos, p. 120.

6 Op cit., pp. 121. 113.

7 "Aštuntoji elegija" *Aidai*, 1947, No 3, p.100. 8 Orfėjaus medis (1953) p. 97

8 Orfėjaus medis (1953), p.97

9 Praradimo simfonijos, pp. 120. 84; Orfėjaus medis, p. 84.

10 Praradimo simfonijos, p. 97.

11 *Vyno stebuklas* (1974), p. 25,

- 12 Balandžio vigilija, pp. 67-69.
- 13 Žiemos teologija p 81
- 14 *Op cit* . p. 58
- 15 *Praradimo simfonijos*, p 82.
- 16 Vyno stebuklas, p.19.
- 17 Žiemos teologija, p. 124.
- 18 Balandžio vigilija, p. 50 . italics mine, p. 86, italics mine.
- 19 *Op. cit.* p 86, my italics.
- 20 *Žiemos teologija*, p 93.