

TOWARD A HISTORY OF BODILY DISCIPLINE^{*}

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In 1819 in the western Lithuanian town of Kretinga, Franciscan monk Jurgis Ambraziejus Pabrėža preaches a sermon on the Sixth Commandment.¹ In it he describes, with an ethnographic sense of experienced concreteness, a variety of everyday practices in the Lithuanian countryside he uniformly, though with degrees of intensity, regards as mortal sins.

These include, first, acts of aggression against women (dragging them by their skirt around the barn, kicking at their private parts); second, informal, institutionally unrecognized friendships between men and women unmarried or not married to each other (even going to church together or mending each other's clothes become sins for them); third, acts of cross-dressing by both men and women.

But most of the time Pabrėža describes a variety of sensory bodily contacts — by touch, by smell or by gaze, with one's own body (it is a mortal sin to sleep without a shirt to avoid fleas); with a woman's body (it is sinful to lift up a woman or to let herself be lifted by a man, to press a hand while riding on a cart, to kiss or embrace at a wedding, particularly bad for an old woman to do so); with a child's body (it is sinful to let a child run around half-naked in the summer or to allow oneself while breast-feeding an infant to experience pleasure); with the bodies of animals, birds, and "little worms" (it is sinful "intentionally to observe them without shame"); or even with artificial bodies ("it is sinful to play with dolls" — or puppets).²

Any direct contact with the body is sinful. But, in the system of symbolic classification proposed by Pabrėža, bodily contact becomes sinful only when it occurs "without pressing necessity," *be slušno reikalo*, sinful when it is motivated by curiosity, joy or playfulness. "Without pressing necessity" correlates in his system with "intentionally", *tyčiomis*, "by good will", *iš geros valios*, and "to play or to indulge", *bovytis*. Aggressiveness seems to arise within this expressive (and for this reason objectionable) class of phenomena.

Touching one's own body and cross-dressing are explicitly exculpated when they are done because of "pressing necessity". In this Catholic tradition that seems also to connect strangely with features of nineteenth-century bourgeois prudery, contacts with any actual body never belong to the realm of sacredness, as they might in India. The body that is sacralized as an image of Christ remains a screen on which that image is projected, not an actual body with its own behavioral logic.

Bodily contacts are not sacralized but exculpated, relieved from the drive toward sinfulness, when they are guided by instrumental rationality. Only then does carnality belong to a morally neutral sphere, characterized, however, not by experiment, exploration, or imagination, as it might be in western Europe since the late Middle Ages, but by objectively pressing necessity. Only necessity exculpates the body. Only what is not necessary can be sinful.³

Otherwise, when moved by joy, playfulness, curiosity or free will, the body is led to "shamelessness", assigned to the profaned, fallen sphere of values and life in this mythopoetic Central East European system of moral classification. In this respect Pabrėža may be located within Yuri Lotman's observations on differences between the binary structure of East European and the trinal structure of modern West European culture.⁴ The Lithuanian monk-scientist does not exclude the neutral middle — but he permits only determinism, not freedom to enter into it. The placing of necessity between good and evil strikes us as more Nordic-Protestant than Mediterranean-Catholic in inspiration.

For "shamelessness" (not guilt), which coincides with "mortal sin", and is even more serious when committed with non-Catholics, when the whole holy faith is desecrated (the individual acting as a representative of the collectivity), Pabrėža

threatens with a variety of eternal punishments in hell. From them there is no escape — but they will finally lead to "reason" when it will be too late, in an almost tragic genre.

There is a peculiar importance assigned to reason — as practical rationality that evacuates "shameless" playfulness, and as substantive reason to which *only* eternal punishment (but not, for example, a normal process of maturation into adulthood) can lead. Repentance *now* will protect from eternal punishment, but is linked not only with a rational recognition of consequences, but even more with appeals to emotion (the love of Christ, Virgin Mary and the Church ought to be the ultimate motivation for repentance).

A strange mix of the twelfth-thirteenth century (sin, hell, and repentance, with no purgatory yet in sight) and the age of Enlightenment (instrumental and substantive rationality — the latter, however, arising only from the experience of punishment, when it is too late to act on it), with some Baroque elements thrown in (fusion of intellect with emotion, collective responsibility for adulteries with dissenters), and more than a trace of bourgeois prudery reminiscent of dressing the "legs" of pianos in morally upright homes (the sinfulness of dolls).

Pabrėža thought that his age was one of moral decay, with corrupt theories and practices corresponding to them being spread by "newly fashionable philosophers or, more precisely speaking, libertines", "of whom there are already many [in 1819] even among common people". But the practices he describes, such as folk wedding customs, barnyard behavior, curiosity about animals and so on, do not seem derived from the teachings of French philosophers, or from urban ways, or from secularized attitudes. It is therefore probable that his systematically rigorous preaching, embracing all the details of bodily contact, arises not as a "normative reaction to a lack of normality", but as an effort to raise disciplinary demands, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with regard to practices previously taken for granted by Catholic priests in Lithuanian peasants.⁵

Even if "there have appeared in our times" "masks / scarecrows" and "louts" in human guise who "in their hearts think and dare to chatter to others" "that unchastity is not a sin", and Pabrėža's obvious disgust with this new wave of frankness, which he may have first encountered as a student of medicine at the Supreme School of Lithuania in 1793-1794, gives a special edge to his preaching, we still need to explain why his program for disciplining lay bodies extends so far as to suppress everything non-utilitarian pertaining to them, the whole folk culture of bodies-in-touch. (In Anglo-French terms, a seventeenth-century type of battle.)

In this respect, Pabrėža's sermon begs to be considered in the theoretical perspective formulated by Norbert Elias.⁶ The German sociologist, in *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation*, analyzed the importance of etiquette books, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, in shaping reliable habits of restraining aggression and impulsive behavior generally in members of the west European aristocracy and later on the higher bourgeoisie. The critical condition which made etiquette books effective in transforming character was relative social and economic security in the strata in which this process occurred.

Pabrėža seems to be representing a version of the civilizing process, several centuries belatedly, directed at an East Central European peasantry. Or at least at the western Lithuanian version of it: there is no evidence of similar processes at that time in eastern Lithuania. However, comparable psychocultural and behavioral changes appear to have occurred among Lutheran Lithuanians in East Prussia throughout most of the eighteenth century, though with state schools and a spontaneous religious movement of the Pietist type as its main instruments, and perhaps more easily dealt with in Foucauldian than in Eliasian terms.⁷

Foucault is more usable in eighteenth-century Prussia both because by then the consolidation of the absolutist modern state was well advanced (which Elias treated as made possible by the character changes he described); and because Elias attributes collective character formation to a series of individual writers in particular social settings, whereas for Foucault this is a more impersonal process, with "authors" dissolved into indicators of an otherwise unexplained emergence of new logics of power.

The latter model seems closer to Prussia's enlightened despotism, the former to western Lithuania (recently incorporated into the Russian empire) in the early nineteenth century. Pabrėža may be seen as resonating peripherally with the needs of "developing capitalism" (in his intention to discipline the body by "pressing necessities"), but he was not involved in constructing the institutions of a carceral society.

Foucault must also be recognized as imposing theoretical limitations on the analysis of what is going on in early nineteenth-century Lithuania. Since "personality" disappears in his analytical framework, it can provide only the cognitive categories and organizational forms constraining psychohistorical processes — which require Elias or other kinds of theories to grasp them. Further problems with Foucault's method are that one is encouraged to see epistemes replacing one another over time and loses sight of "the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous" — the continued interplay of the meanings of different epochs in any vital culture (and thus of any modern culture) — and also of significant national differences.

In his sermon, Pabrėža aimed at shaping a more reserved body, completely enfram'd all the time in clothing, in a determined distance to its own spontaneity, and in its own instrumental employment, always fearful of eternal punishment

— almost as if he had wanted to transform Lithuanian into Swedish peasants. To the young in his audience, Pabrėža proposes, in a striking image, to seal their noses and ears against the smells and sounds of corruption: Christ, he says, has "little corks without number".

In these respects, the provincial priest can be regarded as a historically late but structurally early modernizer in the intimate sphere of life for the Catholic Lithuanian peasantry, a religious initiator of its psychological modernization in a repressive and rationalizing mode. This task is later taken over by the secular wing of the national revival movement, the liberals and the socialists. But the priest may have been there first.

One might ask whether conditions existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century for effectiveness of the kind of moralizing enterprise in which Pabrėža engages. The kind of social and economic security described by Elias as a condition of effectiveness for etiquette books did not obtain in the nineteenth century Lithuanian countryside. But perhaps conditions of effectiveness for religious sermons are different, instability and widespread suffering increasing their potency.

The evidence from the latter part of the nineteenth century from the same western Lithuania does not suggest that Pabrėža's sermons — popular though they were in many little towns and villages — had much of a disciplinary effect on bodily behavior in the longer term. Around the mid-century, Catholic priests, Dovydaitis and bishop Valančius, again complain, as Pabrėža had done, about terrible moral decay, corrupting images, and unheard-of promiscuity, "even among relatives".⁸ To be sure, their concern becomes more focused on central issues of social morality (especially alcoholism) and does not extend too far into the peripheries of any non-utilitarian bodily contact with which Pabrėža seems to have been, by later standards, excessively preoccupied.

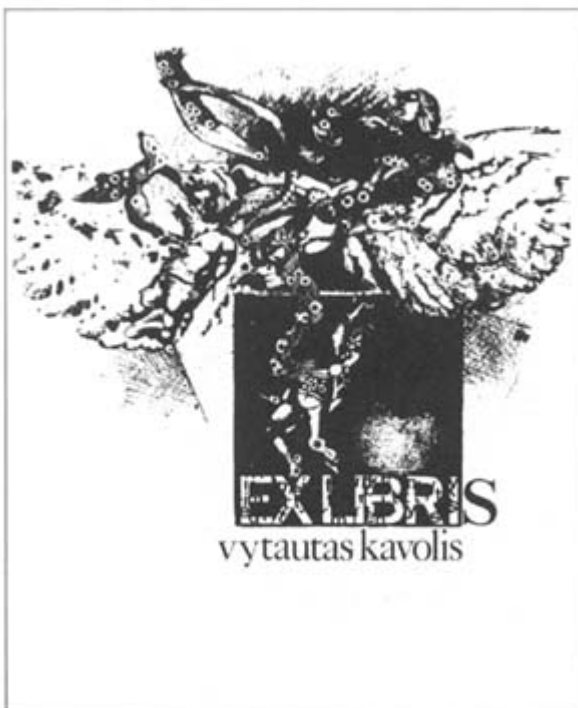
Pabrėža may have come after the historical time — perhaps the middle of the eighteenth century — when with his systematic fear of the body he could have been greatly effective. Or at least fear of the body could have carried weight as obligatory priestly rhetoric. But at that time no one in peasant Lithuania could have thought of fearing the body in the midst of precisely observed concrete society. Thus too late as a theologian, too early as a social theorist / culture reformer. But wonderfully eloquent in a language very close to life.

Perhaps Pabrėža did help shape some of the "Protestant-appearing" behavioral traits of western Lithuanians, including a possibly sharper differentiation between the public and the private sphere of life and values. There are no later descriptions, as in his sermon, of women who "in the sight of others, undressed to the nude, immodestly scratch themselves for fleas and lice".⁹

The disappearance of such primordial women may be due more to economic advances and the abolition of serfdom in 1861 than to the efforts of the monk-botanist-poet-lexicographer-healer, the most modern mind in early nineteenth century Lithuanian cultural history.¹⁰

But who knows? Pabrėža was believed to have worked miracles after his death.

Ethnography as the common ground for the divided late-early modern Lithuanian intellect? The case could still be made today.



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¹ Jurgis Ambraziejus Pabrėža, Pamokslas Apei Šeštą Prisakymą Dievo Sakyts Kretingoj metų 1819, laiku aktovos Nekalto Prasiidėjimo Švč. M.P.

² In his two poems about adult males, Pabrėža is at ease with the little pleasures of decent everyday life, including beer drinking in a tavern, provided one does not incur debts, and smoking a pipe, which gives constancy in facing the strains of life and reminds of the evanescence of human existence. The poems suggest that the older adult male, the old-fashioned householder, is unproblematic for Pabrėža and that his severe sermons may be directed at other kinds of human beings, perhaps especially women and the younger generation, who need to be disciplined for a new, more serious kind of life.

³ In his self-directed notes, Pabrėža vows to punish himself for any "unnecessary" look at a woman, even while visiting the sick. But the realm of "necessity" extends only to relations with bodies. Plants, he says, he "loves". Viktoras Gidžiūnas, *Jurgis Ambraziejus Pabrėža (1771-1849)* (Roma: Lietuvių Katalikų Mokslo Akademija, 1993), pp. 14, 233-34, 237-39, 243. Pabrėža seems to have been particularly sensitive to the modality of the gaze: both to the dangers of his own seeing, and to being constantly under God's eye, "as if God every moment was looking through the window" (p. 23). (The followers of *Panopticon* might have understood the latter, but not, to their loss, the former.) But here again: as little to see of human beings as necessary ("to get used not to look at men as well" — p. 237), as much to see of plants as possible (1,041 pages of one of several manuscripts about them, a large herbarium). The danger that could have come through the eye is more likely, for Pabrėža, to have been anger than desire. "Restraining anger" is as important in his self-notes as "protecting eyes and tongue" (234, 238). Little sense of fatal attraction to be mastered in him.

⁴ Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, eds., *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History: Essays by Iurii M. Lotman, Lidiia Ia. Ginsburg, Boris A. Uspenskii* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 26-28, 30-66.

⁵ Complaints by German observers about insufficiently disciplined behavior of Lithuanian peasants in East Prussia go back to at least 1578.

⁶ Norbert Elias, *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 2. Auflage (Bern: Francke, 1969).

⁷ Vytautas Kavolis, *Žmogus istorijoje* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1994), pp. 546-8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁸ *Lietuvių didaktinė proza* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1982), pp. 333, 414, Kavolis, op. cit., pp. 460-1, 549-50.

⁹ A priest could not have directly observed such behavior. If viewed as a childhood memory, it could go some distance in explaining Pabrėža's adoption of what seems an excessively systematic disciplinary stance toward the body to recommend in the nineteenth century, by a Franciscan, largely to peasants.

¹⁰ Pabrėža's is a more differentiated intellect than any revealed before in the Lithuanian language. There seem to be no bridges at all between his poetry, his science, and his religion — except for references to Lithuanian ethnography.