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THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITHUANIAN LITERATURE IN THE WEST:

Two Divergent Strands

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The year 1918 brought Lithuanian independence after a period of 123 years of foreign rule. During the 1920s, the Lithuanian people, who in the fifteenth century had ruled all the lands between the Baltic and Black seas, were caught up in the excitement of building a modern nation. The writers, too, were caught up in the exuberance over new-found freedom and power. In fact, they were at the very center of thought, activity, and organization during Lithuania's independent years, much as the Irish writers were at the beginning of the twentieth century. Also, for the first time, Lithuanian writers felt free to become individualists. There were symbolists, surrealists, classicists, futurists, and others, all becoming aware of world literature and frantically attempting to catch up to its developments. As Algirdas Landsbergis, writer and critic, says, "It has only been since the early 1920's that the writer could begin to consider himself an artist, first and foremost, and not primarily a patriot or teacher . . ." ¹

Writers of the 30's had come to maturity in an independent Lithuania, and they moved from romanticizing the past to an interest in psychological depiction of contemporary scenes. According to Šilbajoris, "In the 1930's Lithuanian literature came of age in the sense that art itself, as an embodiment of a personal vision of reality, became the object of primary concern." ²

One of the writers I have chosen to translate dates from this time. Antanas Vaičiulaitis was born in Lithuania in 1906, and in the 1930's was a high school teacher and also a lecturer at the University of Kaunas. His novel *Valentina* was published in 1936, and two collections of short stories came out in 1932 and 1933.

Vaičiulaitis's works were well-received at the time, and he is still considered a master of Lithuanian prose. His contribution to the development of Lithuanian literature was a richness of vocabulary, and the ability to find the exact word necessary to give his phrases a haunting melody. Unfortunately, these are the very qualities which are most often lost in translation, for the Lithuanian language in the hands of a master contains more nuances and shades of meaning in a short phrase than the English language can convey in a sentence. Vaičiulaitis is also important because he wrote as an artist, not as a propagandist or a teacher.

This period of literary development, however, was destined to be brief. Lithuania's independence lasted for only twenty-two years. In 1940 Lithuania was invaded and forcibly annexed to the USSR. There followed a year of brutal Stalinization. Writers were forced through terrorization, censorship, and ideological brainwashing to "hail and glorify the establishment of the Soviet system in Lithuania." ³ Three subsequent years of Nazi occupation brought similar trials. With the return of the Soviets in 1944, about two-thirds of the Lithuanian writers, along with 62,000 other Lithuanians, went abroad — most to the United States, but some to Canada, Europe, Australia, or Latin America. **O**f the remainder, some were trapped in the homeland while others decided not to leave for political reasons. Thus, Lithuanian literature was split in two. The two branches, the literature of exile and the literature of Soviet Lithuania, remain separate today due to Soviet restrictions. While books and periodicals from Soviet-occupied Lithuania are available in the West, and the exiles can follow the literary developments of their homeland, books from the "free" world are not permitted in the Soviet Union. Thus, for the most part, writers there are unaware of the developments of Lithuanian literature in exile.

In Lithuania, the decade following the war was the most difficult. Emigration and deportation to Stalin's concentration camps left few writers and intellectuals. Also, the doctrine of socialist realism and the use of brutal terror "paralyz[ed]

literature for a time."⁴ The political aspect again dominated literature. Not many writers "succeeded in ceasing to worship tractors, the building of Communism, and Stalin."⁵

Generally, it is said that a two-fold life for the artists has developed. They write some of their work for the censors and for publication. Some of it, however, is written as art and has begun to appear in the underground press. Today, Lithuania is reported to have more underground journals than the entire Soviet Union. Two newspapers, "Aušra" ("The Dawn") and "Varpas" ("The Bell"), which were first printed during the press ban of 1864-1904, have been resurrected, using the same names and continuing the old volume numbering. While the underground press at first dealt mainly with political and religious themes, it is now acquiring a literary dimension as well. For example, an anonymous play called "Pasivaikščiojimas mėnesienoje" ("A Walk in the Moonlight") which was first published in an underground periodical, has reached the West and was staged at New York's Theater for a New City in 1978.⁶ This underground literature, then, is attempting to grapple with the same problems Lithuanian writers have been dealing with since the late 1800's: religious persecution, national consciousness, self-respect, and an attempt to catch up to a world literature which they have access to only in a much-diluted and much-delayed fashion.

The Lithuanian writer in exile is dealing with an entirely different set of problems than his counterpart in contemporary Lithuania. One of these problems is the Lithuanian reader in exile. First of all, the writer's audience is severely limited. Most of the 62,000 Lithuanians who left the country have taught their children to read and write in Lithuanian; however, this number is very small compared to an English-speaking audience. A Lithuanian writer cannot make a living from his writing, and thus he must have a job (usually a menial one for the first exiles) to support himself. Also, as the readers die off, and as their children, born and raised in America, adopt American values and customs, the writer's audience will disintegrate. Šilbajoris's assessment of the situation is realistic and grim: "As it is, the sources of the exile literature must eventually dry up, as the ethnic Lithuanian communities become fully integrated into adopted cultures, principally in the United States."⁷

Emigre literature has basically been divided into three periods: 1) the period of the refugee camps in Germany and Austria (1945-50), which was characterized by feelings of alienation, nostalgia, and uncertainty of the future; 2) the period of settlement (1950-60) in which difficulties of adaptation to the unfamiliar and conflict between old and new values were uppermost; and 3) the period of integration into a new, modern society, in which experimentation in literature once more became important.⁸

Within these categories the attitudes and development of individual writers vary widely. As Šilbajoris has expressed it:

The holocaust of war blew down the walls of home, making us both naked and free. It was a tragic liberation, but it did open new horizons, new countries, new civilizations, new ways of perceiving things. Some writers refused this challenge and remained safely inside the walls of what they persist even now in believing is their home, although it has lost all material substance . . . Other writers, however, decided to face the new reality as well as they could and to search for new forms and ideas which would make their work meaningful in terms of the new situation . . .⁹

Older, conservative writers, for example, still feel an intense loyalty to the past and have not yet gone beyond the refugee camp period in their writing. Their themes include romantic depictions of the Lithuanian landscape and of the purity of the peasant soul. Legends and folklore are written for inspiration. For these writers, exile is a burden, not a challenge, and their profound homesickness has shaped their art.

Other writers have become stuck in the period of settlement. Their writing reflects the problems faced by people from a primarily agrarian society trying to cope with an industrial one. Most of the Lithuanian emigrants settled in large cities in which their chances of survival were best. Yet, they were people who had lived close to nature for centuries and their deepest sensibilities were rooted in the rhythms of the natural world.

The writers alone are not to blame for their lack of development. Many times the writer's audience, his fellow-exiles, wants to read nothing more than "soothing reassurances and . . . dioramas of familiar landscapes and values."¹⁰

Vaičiulaitis, who emigrated to America in 1940 and is currently living in Bethesda, Md., has successfully overcome these types of problems. Unlike most writers of his generation, he has not grown bitter over his exile, nor does his interest in themes dealing with the homeland and the past interfere with the perfection of his art. Vaičiulaitis does not use Lithuania in his writing only to mourn its loss or to praise its beauty and the achievements of her people. Rather, he concentrates on the universal qualities of his experiences. As Šilbajoris has written about Vaičiulaitis, "There is no need of a catastrophe to make him an exile; the shock of disappointed love, the urgent pressure of hard and personal decisions will be enough to tear the fabric of his dreams and make him feel a stranger and alone in the very places which, a moment earlier, seemed so much like paradise."¹¹ Thus, it is his ability to present emotions, understood by all men, in a clear and non-judgmental manner that appeals to his readers.

Besides Vaičiulaitis, there are other writers who are dealing successfully with integration into a new society and experimenting with new forms. In 1979 the book *Lithuanian Writers in the West, An Anthology* was published, and it contains a comprehensive selection of current Lithuanian writing. The book covers a total of 66 writers. Of these, 30 write poetry, 4 write dramas, and 32 are prose writers. The mean average age of these writers is: poets — 60 years; dramatists — 58 years; and prose writers — 64 years. What is most interesting is the age of the youngest writer in each of these groups: the youngest poet is 38; the youngest dramatist — 53; and the youngest prose writer — 44.¹²

Obviously, the children of the emigrants of the 40's are not making an impact on the development of Lithuanian literature at this time. One of the reasons for this is a problem with the language itself. These children grew up in a bilingual setting. Their education, their careers, and, for many, their social lives, are all conducted in English. It is only in the home and through organized activities on weekends that they can use the Lithuanian language. Many of them do not read Lithuanian books and periodicals (much less write them) because it takes them twice as long as it would to read something in English. Also, the themes which interest their parents do not interest the children. They are not familiar with an agrarian society, and most of them have never seen Lithuania.

The second author I chose to translate is Kazys Almenas, who is the youngest Lithuanian prose writer in the anthology. Though he was born in Lithuania in 1935, Almenas grew up in America, was educated here, and received a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Warsaw, Poland. While he writes in Lithuanian, Almenas' themes are no longer centered around the homeland, around nostalgia and loss. Instead, he explores two worlds — the life and conflicts of the emigres and their children in America, and the life of his contemporaries in American society. His contributions to the development of Lithuanian literature are his new themes, his departure from the romantic, agrarian content of the past, and his simple, direct language. Almenas has written two novels, both dealing in historic fiction, *Upė į rytus, upė į šiaurę (River to the East, River to the North)*, published in 1964, and *Šienapiūtė (Hay-harvest)*, published in 1970, as well as collections of short stories.

My reason for choosing to translate "Žvejų duktė Banguolė" ("Banguolė, the Fisherman's Daughter") and "Pasaulio užkariautojas" ("The Conqueror of the World") was to show the two main differences in Lithuanian prose works in the West. "Banguolė" was published in a collection of short stories in 1966, and "Conqueror" in 1967. However, the first is rooted in the past, both in language and ideology, while the second deals with the present and the future in everyday language.

In form, "Banguolė" is not quite a short story, but rather something between a fairy tale and a legend. Thus, psychological complexity is not as important as is the basic theme. The setting of the story is in the ancient past, in prehistorical times, and Vaičiulaitis has recreated the language patterns of the people of that time.

Banguolė, the main character of the story, is of simple background, as are many of Vaičiulaitis's characters. She is the daughter of a family whose men have been fishermen for generations. Her family lives in a humble cottage in a small fishing village and is closely linked with nature both because of their surroundings and their occupation. Their home is surrounded by the dunes, the sea, and the woods, and they make their living at the mercy of the sea. Banguolė herself is even more closely linked with nature — her name is derived from the word "bangos," "waves" — and the repeated descriptions of her play in the dunes and woods, and the mention of how happy she was there show her deep love for all the elements of nature.

The plot of "Banguolė" is not complex, because for Vaičiulaitis the theme is more important. All that really happens in the story is that a fisherman's daughter is stolen by a Viking leader to be his bride. She bears him a family, but is never happy and longs for her homeland. When she dies, according to her last wish, her husband attempts to take her home and bury her with her family. However, a storm arises and the god of thunder sends the boat to the bottom of the sea.

It is the images which Vaičiulaitis creates that carry the story, impress the characters' emotions on the reader, and contain the themes. To create these images, nature is very extensively used. For example, the peace and tranquillity of Banguolė's life at the beginning, when she lived in her homeland and loved a simple fisherman's son, is mirrored by the sentence "The two walked along the sea and the waters sang to them." Later, when Banguolė has met Sigurdas, the Viking captain, she again walks home along the sea, but this time "the gulls screeched at her" and "the dune grass softly droned." The difference between the singing, and the screeching and droning expresses the contrasting emotions Banguolė felt and is also a portent of things to come.

Another important element in the creation of images is Vaičiulaitis's use of symbols. Banguolė's name, for example, fulfills many functions. The name ties her to the sea of her homeland and her ancestors' livelihood. The name also refers to the means by which she is stolen away from everything which is precious to her (she is taken in a boat across the sea), and, finally, Banguolė "of the waves" is lost in the sea and cannot be buried in the homeland she so loved.

The amber which Banguolė brings to exchange for a silk scarf at the Viking merchant ship has more than one function as well. Amber is a treasure from the sea. Banguolė offers it to Sigurdas, the Viking leader, and he later returns it to her set in gold and placed on a chain, thus symbolizing his intended possession of her.

The mood and atmosphere of Vaičiulaitis's images depends also on the historical reality on which he has built the story. In ancient times Swedes from the city of Visby actually did trade with the Lithuanian people and sometimes stole Lithuanian women to be their brides. The fact that Banguolė, once she is stolen, does not resist, but gives in to her fate, is, according to Vaičiulaitis, an accurate portrayal of that time. The Lithuanians believed that fate was dealt by the gods and one did not fight it. They also believed that gods dwelt in the forests and the oak was considered a sacred tree. After death, souls were taken to a sacred land where the spirits sat on benches.

Banguolė's values are also true to the times in which she lived. What she yearns for most are her parents, the fire of the hearth of her forefathers, and the protection of the gods of the forests. She is inconsolable at the loss of these and neither

wealth nor the goodness of her husband can make her happy.

Vaičiulaitis's images are enhanced by the lyrical quality of his language. Often, he creates an "interplay" of scene and emotion which seems to be stanzaic in form.¹³ He repeats phrases at various points in the story which create a lyrical continuity. For example, the fluttering of the sails in the wind is described in the same way when the Vikings first appear at Banguolė's village, on the day she is stolen away on their ship, and at the end when the ship is taking her body home. Also, "the black boat," an image which has its roots in a Lithuanian folk song, is repeated throughout the story and describes Banguolė's first lover's boat, Sigurdas' boat, Banguolė's brothers' boat, and the boat that takes her to her burial, as well as many others.

There are many themes which can be found in this story

— love of family, religious beliefs, fidelity to husband, the poor, simple girl elevated in station, and others, but for Vaičiulaitis the most important one is love of homeland. And this is basically an emigrant theme. The emigrant, even though his condition in another land may be better materially, is never completely content and yearns for nothing but the homeland. However, the emigrant also can never go home and must accept his fate.

"The Conqueror of the World," by Kazys Almenas, deals with an entirely different time and a different morality. In this story, Almenas recreates some of his own experiences as a university student. While the portrait of Dave Kelman, one of the main characters in the story, is not based on an actual person, Almenas says he knew many like him.¹⁴

"The Conqueror," like "Banguolė," does not have much of a plot. Instead, the characters are revealed through a series of conversations. The narrator — the "I" of the story

— speaks directly to the audience, describing situations, explaining ideas and terminology, and in general taking the audience along with him on his experience with Dave Kelman. The narrator also transcribes his conversations with Kelman, commenting on them when appropriate.

The ideas which Almenas discusses through his characters are completely modern. He deals, in a general way, with students who are interested in science, describing their characteristics and exploring their relationships with each other and the world, and also deals with them very specifically, such as when he cites statistics on how many students enter the scientific fields and how many are forced to drop out.

Another modern idea treated in the story is that science and technology in our society are actually more powerful than the military. As the narrator says, "From that day, when the first mushroom-shaped cloud sprouted above Alamagordo, New Mexico, all earlier measures of power lost their significance."

Gradually, through his conversations with the narrator, Dave Kelman is revealed to us and the meaning of the title "Conqueror of the World" becomes clear. Dave is arrogant, very intelligent, and totally dedicated to the field of biophysics. It is toward the end of the story, when Kelman is depicted in his own lab, cutting off rats' heads for a genetic study, that we begin to realize his true power. Kelman firmly believes that he, and others like him, will eventually control the world by being in a position to choose the genetic make-up of the next generations. The narrator is horrified. He accuses Dave of "talking nonsense," of being "naive," and of "raving." Yet, when he leaves Dave's lab, the reader has the impression that the narrator really does believe in Dave's assertions, and, in turn, we too are horrified.

The stark realism of Almenas' language contributes to this effect on the reader. For example, Dave is described in great detail so that we visualize him. He is not romanticized in any way: "He was of medium height, stockily built with a rather broad face ... He looked as if he hadn't shaved for three days." The lab Dave works in is also clearly depicted, but the images which have the greatest shock value are those which describe the calm, systematic way in which Dave cuts off the rats' heads. Dave's gentleness in trying to keep the rats calm at the moment of their death is contrasted by the sound of the shears cutting flesh and bone, the jerk of the rat bodies, and the description of the blood from the moment it flows out in a stream to the moment Dave squeezes out the last few drops.

The theme of this story, according to Almenas, is that people such as Kelman pose a threat to a democratic society. Their delusions of superiority and the very real power of the technology they control is a danger to us all. Just as Kelman is never treated in a laughable manner in the story, so we cannot laugh away the results of many of the newest results of scientific research.

The stories of Vaičiulaitis and Almenas give a clear picture of the two strands of Lithuanian literature that exist in the West today. But they do not answer the questions in the minds of many Lithuanians. Where will the literature develop from here? Since Dr. Almenas is the youngest prose writer, who will write in 10, 20, or 30 years time? Is the Lithuanian language still a viable medium for writers? Can the poetic, romantic Lithuanian literary tradition expand to encompass the modern world? Is there a future for Lithuanian literature in the United States? For many Lithuanians the possible answers to these questions are very grim. However, I feel that is even more reason for those who read and understand Lithuanian to share it with those who do not. Every culture, regardless of its development, has a contribution to make to world literature.

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