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## FORBIDDEN THOUGHTS, PERMITTED VOICES: POETS IN LITHUANIA AND IN THE LENINGRAD UNDERGROUND

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Aside from prison songs and other similar items in the oral tradition, it is possible to distinguish, with some gray areas in-between, two types of poetry now written in the Soviet Union. One type is the "official poetry," produced according to the demands of socialist realism, or at least according to some overall established ideological norms, and the other is poetry where the artist's individual creative imperatives and standards of value are prevalent.

This second type of poetry has been published and continues to exist along with the "official" line in Soviet Lithuania, while in Russia itself it has been suppressed, often forced underground, and the poets themselves persecuted.

Among the reasons for this difference, one is that the Lithuanian poetry does not contain any explicit and uncompromising political protest, whereas, for instance, a group of underground poets in Leningrad, gathered in a manuscript collection entitled "The Living Mirror" (*Živoe zerkalo*) are very severe and outspoken critics of Soviet ideas and of Russian history. It is an indication of the Leningrad poets' attitude that they should dateline their collection "Sankt Peterburg, 1974," thus denying the reality, or at least the relevance to true poetic tradition, of the entire historical and cultural presence and myth of Leningrad. As part of this official mythology of Soviet culture, they reject the recognition given the most famous Russian poets of the past, when their achievements are regarded as if they were some early landmarks of the ultimate development of the new and glorious Soviet society. In face of such false honors, the Leningrad poets prefer, as a matter of principle, to remain illegitimate and unrewarded. In the preface to their collection they say: "There is nothing more unnatural than an understood, recognized and moreover a well-fed poet. A true poet is always unrecognized, naked and hungry."

By contrast, the Lithuanian poets prefer to eat the bread in peace and do not despise recognition, even from the state, provided only that they remain themselves the arbiters of their own artistic integrity. The result is a multi-leveled and associative poetry remote from the declarative style of socialist realism, but also, at least seemingly, free from any dangerous subtexts pertaining to history and politics. Here, for example, is the description of a sunset by the Lithuanian poet Jonas Juškaitis:

*Painfully crimson and salty  
Winds from the sundown horizon  
Are blowing. In their echoes, a gift  
Of voices, coming from shapes darker  
Still than the dark of the sea.*

*Hues of the Summer. Red,  
You are so serene! A verdant  
Darkness descends, like a silent lament,  
Like the cry of an organ, this darkness  
Is guarded by sunken ships.*

(Jonas Juškaitis, *Mėlyna žibutė apšvietė likimą* (A Blue Violet Has Illuminated Fate), p. 14)

The secret pain and darkness enchanted in the hues of the summer and in the breath of the sea, the *correspondences* among colors, sounds, music and unfathomable shapes (reminiscent of the Symbolists), permit a number of transcodings

into personal experience, to most of which the literary dogma of the state is irrelevant. Such poetry can and has been attacked precisely for this "irrelevance," but it does not seem so dangerous as to demand outright suppression.

On the other hand, here is a sunset by one of the poets from the Leningrad underground, Mixail Gendelev:

*Clouds have set on the edge of the fields, and the birds  
Speechlessly rose to a flight past the vaults of the sky.  
The day, sinking down to the earth, became the time of the twilight —  
And a breeze of the sunset, rosy and sad, has come up from the river.  
Ivan's horses are drinking the crimson expanse of the waters.*

*As the day sunk down to the earth, the earth forgot it already —  
So it buries its life without tears, without funeral songs,  
There is a slight blush on the knife from the blood of the rooster.  
Someone's word, or the beating of wings, or a rusty old tin —  
Or the throat, dropping a cry before it was slashed to the end.*

*The song was not finished. Stretching humbly its neck  
To the mercy of knife, the pity of block, dark with blood —  
It failed to sing in the day to the earth in its twilight, when  
The whinnying horses will offer their manes to the bearers of judgment.  
Ivan's horses, who drank to the end of the crimson expanse of the waters.*

Here the subtexts are indeed dangerous to the benevolent, humanitarian myth of the state. The poem is dedicated to an underground colleague of Gendelev, Mixail Kuzminskij, who used the phrase "head on a platter" in a double-edged reference to St. John the Baptist and to the peculiar and frightening Russian capacity to forgive their own tyrants forever. Gendelev develops this theme into a symbol of Russia's poetic voice, the chanticleer, forever prophesying the new dawn that never came. On the pivotal image of its slashed throat, the name John is transformed to Ivan the Terrible and his victorious horses drinking blood.

In this dark and brooding view of Russian history Ivan the Terrible becomes a symbol of sufficient magnitude to encompass the entire image of Russia from ancient days to Stalin and beyond as a timeless empire of slaves enslaving others, under whatever banner. In this context, the old two-headed imperial eagle becomes a peculiarly suitable emblem to embody the deep inner schizophrenia of the Russian mind, torn between high-sounding ideals and bloody deeds. In the words of another underground poet: "The Russian truth is double-headed./The Russian soul is split apart, and so is Russian justice," The point is that underneath the revolutionary rhetoric, the Soviet state is in fact built on the conquests of Russia's imperial past, and the Leningrad poets have been forced underground from bringing this fact to the surface.

By contrast, those of the published Lithuanian poets who do refer to the sufferings of their country brought to it by this perennial Russian empire, try to diffuse or obscure its criminal nature. Justinas Marcinkevičius, for instance, identifies the tragic events of the postwar guerilla struggle with the positive aspects of what the Soviet ideology calls "the processes of history." In one poem he describes how, as a small child growing up in the village, he used to be sent out as a lookout for "the forest" and for "the city" in turns, as the guerillas and the Soviet security forces chased each other back and forth across the landscape. Marcinkevičius concludes his poem by a conscious decision to cast his final lot with "the town," because the future belongs to it:

*And I can see how on the path along the granary  
There comes our History — she looks so much like mother.  
She strokes my head, and her good hand relieves my vigil  
Despite the forest's gloom and angry roar.*

(Justinas Marcinkevičius, *Sena abėcėlė* (The Old ABC), p. 234)

Janina Degutyté, a poet of strong and honest feeling, does not escape into such forgiveness, where mother History and mother Russia become one and the same. She speaks unflinchingly in the tragic voice, but she remains publishable because she transfers the agony of her people into an ancient context of sorrow that comes from the ambiance of folk songs — a context in which both the guerillas and their pursuers can be portrayed as victims of forces incomprehensible to a woman's heart. The issues thus become generalized, removed from particular events in time, but the sorrow remains very poignant and personal:

*The waters of the lake have pierced my limbs with pain.  
My mouth is dry, my eyes are tearful in the wind . . .  
And yet my hands cannot this dotted blood,  
And yet my hands cannot wash out this shirt . . .*

*What will I tell my mother back at home?  
The shirt is all in bloom is all in bloom with tulips red.  
How can I wash this linen, these unyielding stains,  
When northern winds are sucking out my life . .*

(Janina Degutyte, *Mėlynos delfos* (The Blue Waning Moon), p.145)

The washing of the linen, the ornamental tulips of the Lithuanian national dress, are a recurrent image in the folksongs, and here they enrich the continuum of their symbolic meaning with still another sorrow.

For the Leningrad poets, much of their tragic sense of Russian history is focused upon Saint Petersburg, the city of baroque grandeur built across a swamp on the foundation of Russian peasants' bones. The will of the empire, personified in Peter the Great, has turned the poets' eyes to Falconetti's statue of Peter on the banks of the Neva, and thus also to the most famous of all Petersburg poets, Pushkin, and his darkly beautiful poem "The Bronze Horseman." In this work Pushkin depicts both the virile joys of the empire and the ominous threat of doom arising when the cruel power of one man's will become history confronts the dangerous, brooding hatred of conquered nature. One of the Leningrad poets, Oleg Oxapkin, turns to Pushkin's image of the bronze horseman galloping after poor, insane Evgenij after he had dared to threaten the mighty idol in the wake of the catastrophic flood. Oxapkin substitutes for the horseman a horde of Russian poets who lived, wrote and were persecuted in this "most premeditated city in the world," as Dostoevsky called it. Rising in revenge against "the hangmen" of Russian history, these poets gallop after them like Furies gone mad:

*For the heart-rending sorrow of Orpheus' lyre  
I am conjuring you, Falconetti's mad gyre.*

*Who is galloping? Not the immovable steed?  
Look — these are Russian bards, full of wrath and of speed!*

*Look at all the sad prophets, weighed down by Lycurgus  
Who's there galloping? Castor! Watch out, Petersburg!*

*He is followed by Pollux . . . Twins from the heaven,  
It is Pushkin and Lermontov after, you, hangmen.*

*It is Kljuev and Blok at your heels, through the dam,  
Xodasevič, Kuzmin, Gumilev, Mandel'stam.*

*And Eumenide with them — Axmatova — ax!  
And some more I forgot in my desperate rush . . .*

*But these, too, will suffice. Storms are sweeping across!  
O, Rossija, Messiah, weatherwane, cross!*

Exasperated by the official pieties of Soviet literary history, one of the Leningrad poets, who calls himself Gavril'čik, turns upon the mummified, glorified image of Pushkin with a comic verse which would strike any Soviet museum guide as intolerable blasphemy. The poem is about Pushkin's fatal duel:

*The forests deep, the Winter cruel . . .  
Oh, my ... and Pushkin fought a duel!*

*His pistol loaded, what a mess!  
He was about to shoot D'Anthes.*

*But D'Anthes aims his gun sehr gut,  
Goes "Bang!" and Pushkin is kaput,*

*Alas and woe! We lost our bard  
And his so famous backenbart.*

In contrast to this, the Lithuanians are in the paradoxical situation of both having and not having a city such as Petersburg to write about. Vilnius has been the capital of Lithuania since ancient times, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries played an outstanding role as a political and cultural center in Northeastern Europe, but it is just then that it did not belong to Lithuania, because it carried the banner of Polish culture. Adam Mickiewicz is closely connected with Vilnius, his poetry does embody the romantic and patriotic spirit of historical Lithuania and, moreover, he was Pushkin's personal friend. Yet, Mickiewicz as a poet belongs totally to the milieu of the Polish literary tradition.

So then, in contradistinction from the Russians, the crimes of the past were committed by strangers, against a city which was then not ours and against a poet whom we don't possess. All this diminished the danger of writing forbidden poetry

centered upon Vilnius. What we have instead is an effort to build a radiant city for our love from the mists of ancient legend and from the dusty bricks of present reality.

An instructive case is that of Judita Vaičiūnaitė who, in striving to love Vilnius, attempts to achieve an intimate, palpable feeling for its texture and for the presence of history in its buildings, people and streets. But this comes out in her verse with a kind of antiquarian flavor, as if what she can feel is not the living pulse of history, but just some fragments of the past infused with emotion. In one of her Vilnius poems, entitled "Bazaar of Cheap Antiques," Vaičiūnaitė writes:

*Ikons. Books. Mirrors.  
Children's shoes.  
From the sun,  
he radiating heat of crematoriums is piercing through.  
Please pick out something.  
A crush of people. A baby wearing woolen socks. The heat.  
A drunken gypsy. Old women under sun-bleached umbrellas.  
It was so beautiful,  
that blue one,  
please, forget, madam.  
Forget. The charm of ancient things. The Old-time fashions, gone.  
The smell of childhood rooms,  
and voices from the grave, woven into  
the fabric of the noise.  
A tearful, touching sense of brotherhood  
resembling someone else's  
frayed old shirt,*

(Judita Vaičiūnaitė, *Po šiaurės herbais* (Under Northern Escutcheons), p. 25)

Another perhaps paradoxical phenomenon is that the politically "impure" but permitted Lithuanian poetry contains only faint traces of religious themes. This is somewhat strange, because Lithuania has always been an intensely religious Catholic land, and even today, most of the spiritual resistance to the system comes from a strong religious feeling among the masses. But it is understandable, too, because a full expression of such feeling by the poets would immediately force them underground. In their present condition, they are able sometimes to reflect an aura of religious spirit in the countryside, as long as they do not appear to be militantly protesting their foreign occupation. Thus Janina Degutytė can write of the famous Lithuanian wayside crosses which dot the entire land:

*The Christ of Sorrows  
Stands in the field.  
For someone's heart  
The burden was too great.*

*And all his pain went into  
The wood. Into the wood.  
There was no finding God,  
And someone's sorrow turned to wood.*

*And yet, the wooden crosses  
Were with us in our uprisings.  
And yet, the wooden crosses  
Were with us in Siberia.*

*Like birds arrested in their flight,  
The wooden crosses stand.  
O, wooden God,  
Where is your consolation?*

*The bloody prison walls  
Are in your name.  
And on the hill of ashes  
You sleep with us.*

*The crosses in the field  
Are with us still in our deeds and our tears.  
And all our history is but a forest  
Of crosses on the plains.*

(Janina Degutyté, *Mélynos deltos*, pp. 160-161)

The poets of the Leningrad underground are much more direct. They often write with deep conviction on religious themes, juxtaposing them, at times harshly, with the realities of their Soviet society.

In one poem by Oleg Oxapkin, dedicated to his friend Aleksandr Ožiganov, also an underground poet, the theme of the unrecognized, down-trodden and hungry artist is combined with the ancient figure of the *jurodivyj*, the fool of Christ, wandering poor and despised across the land. Starting out with the lines:

*'Tis perhaps that your Christ is so ragged and poor  
God has granted you poverty, and for this gave you silence.*

Oxapkin finishes the poem in this way:

*But for this that your Christ is so ragged and poor  
You will have no believers, you six-winged tramp, seraphim.  
And nobody will be astonished or awed by your sword.  
Except that, in passing, people may laugh at your rags,  
Not having caught, in their prattle, the sound of your Word.  
Not a cent will you get, unless it's the cops who will come,  
Or a cigarette-butt will be spat in your face by your student,  
Or a girl from the Communist Youth, a snake with cold, shifty eyes,  
Will give you a profligate smile,  
Or else, as they call them, a poet,  
Will, in his foolishness, yawn at your figure  
As it moves in the distance toward eternity's sleep.  
And the snowdust will never remember your footsteps.  
Thus it will pass that your vision shall have no return.*

Such an image of the true poet does indeed show how totally irreconcilable is the official view of Soviet art with the visions of the troubled poets of Leningrad. They seem to have made their choice, to have accepted the worst that the state can threaten them with as artists — namely, complete oblivion in the limbo of non-persons — in order to keep their word pure and free. The Lithuanian poets, on the other hand, seem to reflect the attitude of a nation which has become, so to speak, skillful at being oppressed. They do not so much oppose as move through and around the demands of the State, interpenetrating with its own body politic, and yet, somehow, preserving their moral and artistic integrity. If the Lithuanians have gained some mastery in the art of survival, then the Russians appear to have proven once again that, of all the nations on earth, they may be the ones with the greatest talent for suffering.