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THREE POETS OF DRUSKININKAI

by Jonas Zdanys

The resort town of Druskininkai in southern Lithuania, known for centuries for the healing properties of its mineral springs, is the present home of three of Lithuania's most important contemporary poets: Vytautas P. Bložė, Nijolė Miliauskaitė, and Kornelijus Platelis. Together they form one of the most artistically influential groupings on the current poetic stage in Lithuania, through their work helping to give shape and strong voice to the post-modernist impulse in Baltic poetry.

[Vytautas P. Bložė](#), poet and translator of Pushkin, Schiller, Shakespeare, Rilke, Vallejo, and Cavafy, was born in 1930 in the town of Baisogala. Since his first collection — *Septyni Šienpioviai* (Seven Haymowers)— appeared in 1961, he has been instrumental in the revivification of the Lithuanian poetic voice and in the expansion and further articulation of the Lithuanian poetic idiom. He is considered to be one of the most important innovators in modern Lithuanian poetry, and his work has influenced generations of younger writers, who have sought as well to liberate the tradition from conventions of form, theme, and expression — a fact made increasingly possible because of the ground Bložė managed to break in the face of great aesthetic and political opposition in the 1960s.

Bložė's strivings, though important to writers and generally to cultural advancement and enrichment in Lithuania during the past quarter century, were not well-received by critics or by publication licensing committees under the impositions of social realism. Bložė was often hard-pressed to publish his work. When it did appear, it was either ignored or severely criticized because it had rejected various social realist poetic conventions—what Bložė called "traditional architectonics" — and turned instead to metonyms and metaphors which would allow him a more personalized connection to the world, where "the poet has the right to understand / everything like everyone else/ or like each one/ understands it for himself."

That search for a more personal understanding of the world, which is one of lyric poetry's defining characteristics and strengths, was affirmed by the hope made possible in Lithuania by the brief awakening inspired by the Prague Spring in 1968. When suppression came, it touched Bložė as well. Because his father and sister had been arrested and imprisoned by the Soviets for "anti-Soviet activities," Bložė was always under careful watch and harassment by the KGB. He was arrested several times (the first time when he was only fifteen years old) and for several years was denied appropriate documentation which would enable him even to find a place of his own to live. Unable to publish, ignored by the critics, harassed by the Soviet government, Bložė became quite ill in 1972 and suffered long hospitalization, marked — as he notes — by various deliberate "misdiagnoses and mistreatments" which served only to worsen his medical condition. His health to this day is fragile.

Bložė's work in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s — poetry about Lithuania and about the fate of his family — was labelled as "antirevolutionary" and for the most part was not published anywhere during those years. Unable to earn a living as a writer, Bložė earned what he could as a musician by playing at musical events and dances. Much of his poetic work, especially his early creations, was hidden away to avoid confiscation by the Soviets: buried in the ground, stuffed in double-bottomed drawers, hidden in furniture. Some of his manuscripts were discovered and burned, and much of his work remains unrecovered and unpublished to this day. What has been published appears in several collections. *Iš tylinčios žemės* (From the Silent Ground), *Žemės gėlės* (Earth's Flowers), *Polifonijos* (Polyphonies) *Sena laužavietė* (The Old Place of Bonfires) *Žmonės* (People), and *Miko Kėdainiškių Laiškai* (Letters from Mikas Kėdainiškis).

[Nijolė Miliauskaitė](#), who is married to Bložė, was born in 1950. Beginning with her earliest published poems, which date back to 1968, Miliauskaitė has been writing poetry which focuses the paradigmatic task of the poet — the gathering and revelation of insight about the human condition — through a poetic reconciliation with the things of the world and through the reorganization of the metonymic particulars of memory. Her collections — *Ursulės S. portretas* (Portrait of Ursula S.) and *Namai, kuriuose negyvensim* (A House in Which We Will Never Live) reveal a concentrated sensitivity to the demands

of such reconciliation and reorganization as well as a kind of elegaic composure while facing the demands of both. Each is also an expression of the need to engage in an elemental process of naming the things of the world, including parts of the self, and thereby to conclude successfully the contemporary Lithuanian poet's task to generate a new mythology, to engage herself and the nation in what she calls "the search for a suitable biography."

Reading Miliauskaitė's poems is to make one's way through a set of emotionally charged remembered fragments, to experience the bits and pieces of a reconstituting past and present, and to participate in the acknowledgment of the significance of things as objects and as subjects of a shaping imagination. Part of Miliauskaitė's effort is a process of naming the parts to understand the whole and thereby to possess it. Part of it also is the commitment to divide and classify experience in its own terms, without further reference to symbolic configurations and without poetic reliance on associative relationships and the resulting metaphoric transference of meaning. She relies, instead, on structural contiguity of images, disjunction of language, changing verb tenses, and quick shifts of focus and attention to define her poetic world. She seeks, in that way, to call attention to the distinct elements of her poetic vision, and by doing so to give voice to the forgotten, to the things that lie on the other side of silence and to reconstruct a world in which lost things live or regain life. It is through that reinvigoration that they are able to generate sudden and epiphanic insights, to blossom like the flowers she writes about — "fruits of imagination" — "suddenly unfolding in your garden." It is because of these aesthetic and personal qualities that her poetry is considered to be among the strongest and most compelling written by the younger generation in Lithuania.

[Kornelijus Platelis](#) is a poet, essayist, critic, and translator who was born in 1951 in Šauliai. He graduated from the Vilnius Building Institute in 1973 and worked until 1988 as an engineer in Druskininkai, where he now lives with his wife and two sons. He published his first poems in 1977 and is the author of four collections of poetry — *Žodžiai ir dienos* (Words and Days), *Namai ant tilto* (A Home on the Bridge), *Pinklės vėjui* (A Snare for the Wind), and *Luoto kevalas* (The Boat Shell). His essay on the ecology of culture, *Būstas prie Nemuno* (Being by the Nemunas) was published in 1989. He has translated many of the most important American and British poets — among them Pound, Eliot, Keats, and Shelley — and is presently working on a commentary on a new Lithuanian edition of the Bible. Platelis is President of P.E.N. of Lithuania. His essay "On the Civic Role of Poetry," published in this issue, outlines many of his poetic and literary theories, which he puts to practice in his own work. The poems presented here are my translation.