

## THE EARLY POETRY OF KAZYS BRADŪNAS: INFANT, MOTHER AND NATIONAL JOUISSANCE

JŪRA AVIŽIENIS

University of Washington

This paper is an attempt to apply a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective to Lithuanian poet Kazys Bradūnas's first collection of poetry written and published in exile. The poems in the collection *Svetimoji duona* or "Alien Bread" provide a good context for examining the parallels between the infant's trauma of separation from his mother as he enters the Symbolic Order of social and cultural structures and constraints, and the equally agonizing experience of exile and separation from one's (mother)land or *žemė*. Making such parallels can be justified because of the subject of *Svetimoji duona*'s infant like devotion and attachment to his mother as well as his motherland and because the text is inscribed with the pain of exile/ much as his beloved *žemė* (or motherland) is permeated with and composed of the blood, sweat, and ashes of her loving sons<sup>1</sup> who have either fertilized it with the sweat of their toil, or have shed their blood protecting it:

But where does my home await me?  
Far on the edge of the plains  
Ashes overgrown with grass.

O kur manęs laukia namai?..  
Toli pakrašty lygumuos Apauga žolę pelenai.  
("Vakaras ant svetimų laukų"  
[Evening on Foreign Fields])

and

The fields have an odor of their own —  
Permeated with sweat and blood.

Dirvonai turi savo kvapą —  
Pritvinkę prakaito ir kraujo.

("Tolimas vakaras" [Distant Evening])<sup>2</sup>

The poems in *Svetimoji duona*, written by then 28-year-old Bradūnas and published in Munich in 1945, are more than just a looking back to an idyllic past on the subject's beloved land — they are kind of a "feeling or experiencing back" of the subject's childhood landscapes with all his senses. In this pre-exile world, Bradūnas's child/subject's relationship with his environment can be said to be Imaginary. His mother, the cottage in which they lived, the land they sowed, nature, his nation, his gods and ancestors, and the child compose one imaginary unity, a sense of wholeness that the subject cannot explain, but that he claims to experience with his very being. This unity is not very different from the pre-mirror stage of the infant, who is not yet aware of his own self or of the geographies that comprise his and the Other's individualities.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the oneness described by Bradūnas's subject causes a (not entirely undesirable) confusion for him — in a number of poems he is unsure about the boundaries between himself, the land and waterscapes, and his mother. For example:

It seems I see everything and remember everything  
Dear Nemunas, where do I end and where do you begin?

Only I don't know, from whence so much blue  
Was it her eyes or the flax on the hillside?

Rodos, viską matau, viską pamenu,  
Nemunėli, kur aš, o kur tu?..

Nežinau tiktai, kas mėlynavo,  
Ar jos akys, ar slėnio linai?

("Tremtinio sapnas" [Dream of the Exile] 83)

Besides the physical resemblance of the blue of his mother's eyes to the blue of the flax fields, the narrator here is perhaps also stressing the Lithuanian-ness of the two objects of his desire by possibly invoking the stereotype of the blond-haired, blue-eyed Lithuanian and the traditional dress made of linen.

The above is an example of the subject's identification of himself with the soil/land. In other poems he also identifies himself with the plants rooted in the soil of his homeland. Both he and the plants are the product, as it were, of the land:

Like a blade of grass, uprooted by fate  
Only our roots remain there

Mus, kaip žolę, likimas išrovė,  
Tiktai šaknys paliko tenai,

("Pakeliui" [Along the Way] 15)

The physical and total pain he suffers as a result of separation from his beloved land is made poignant in either case: In the former example, separation means a loss of the subject's entire world; whereas, the latter illustration of exile represents a severing of one's roots, the source of sustenance, security, and ties to the familiar. In either case, the separation coincides with the subject's entering the Symbolic — a world of (alien) cultural codes: new language, new home, new traditions, new gods. The subject's nostalgia for his homeland becomes clearer when one considers the connotations of "homeland" on the various levels suggested in *Alien Bread*: (Sensual) childhood memories of the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feelings associated with childhood and home, (existential) defining oneself and giving meaning to one's life by one's work; (cultural) longing for the return of national sovereignty and yearning for the familiar of one's own language, traditions and ancestral landscapes and traditions, (Christian) anticipation of death and an afterlife in Paradise, and the unconscious (psychic) pull towards pleasure, or *jouissance*.

## Theoretical Background

The object of study in this paper is the exiled subject of *Svetimoji duona* and his experience of exile. The application of Lacanian analysis to a fictive subject is justifiable because for Lacan, the discourse of such a subject is structured in much the same manner as is the narrative of a psychoanalytic subject. The material of both narratives is drawn from unconscious desires. The adult unconscious, according to Lacan, is structured like a language and like a language can be explained in terms of signifiers and signifieds in a chain of signification that must always point back to the foundation of culture — the taboo against incest. In other words, at infancy, the child/subject functions entirely in the Imaginary Realm, the domain of biological needs and appetites. In this scenario, the breast of the mother plays the role of the signifier of desire. Prior to weaning, the child imagines the breast as being always accessible, always available for his pleasure and nourishment, but as he is weaned, he confronts the awareness that some external force is regulating the breast and the amount of satisfaction to be gained from it. That regulating force, Lacan christens "the Name of the Father." The Name of the Father functions to separate the mother and child, i.e., to discourage incest, in order to facilitate individuation.<sup>4</sup> The Name of the Father is the signifier of authority, structures, codes and culture<sup>5</sup>, which is what defines us all as members of a society. In other words, our society functions as the sup-presser of a desire that is always unfulfillable — the desire for an endlessly satisfying, ever-flowing mother's breast.

## Homeland

The *žemė* (land) in *Alien Bread* functions as a signifier of the exiled subject's desire. The exiled subject, much like the weaned child, remembers and longs for the feelings of filiation, nourishment, warmth, and security which filled his and his nation's being prior to separation. Many of these memories have been repressed, and the subject cannot articulate why the "Then" and the "There" felt good, familiar, and warm, and the "Here" and "Now" are so foreign and have no pull on his psyche. The fact that the exiled subject in *Alien Bread* was a child prior to exile contributes to a double "disfiliation"<sup>6</sup> and hence, a more powerful suffering.

By focusing on the poems "Tremtiniui tėvui," (For My Exiled Father) "Svetimoji duona" (Alien Bread), and "Vynuogėms nokstant" (As the Grapes Ripen), I will attempt to demonstrate the above-mentioned levels of meaning that the (mother / land) holds for the subject of *Alien Bread*.

## Sensual and Spiritual Homeland

The Eden that Was' in Bradunas's exiled subject's imagination is distinctly separated from the present space, sensibility, and time using the bipolar oppositions of then and now, there and here, north and south (also up and down, up referring to heaven (the North) and down pointing to earth (the South)), youth / innocence and maturity / experience, the then / there / youthful / northern / heaven site provides a reference point for all that the subject experiences in the now / here / mature / southern / earth space. The space that links the two spheres is filled by the subject's desire for the *žemė*, or the earth, a desire that is indeed reminiscent of the infant's desire. For example, in the poems, "Alien Bread" and "As the Grapes Ripen", the subject places the "foreign" bread and Adriatic wine in direct contrast to home-baked bread, and the warm white sap of the birch trees. Both instances parallel the subject / infant's rejection of non-mother's milk: he finds alien bread hard to swallow, especially because he is being handed it by someone other than the earth / mother / nurturer. And he claims that the wine boiling on the grapevines of the Alpine slopes tastes bitter; he longs for the warm white juices from up north. He prefers the springtime sap to the late autumn wine. The drink of innocence and nature to the symbol of adult sophistication and culture.

The Eden imagined by the subject is composed of the sight of the farm buildings in twilight, the scent of fresh bread in the oven, the anticipation of its fresh taste and warmth:

While eating alien bread  
Each bite unbearably hard to swallow,  
As I receive it, like a sacred reward,  
From a stranger's hand, and not from the land.

And in my eyes — always the same scene of evening —  
The sun sets over the homestead, the grange,  
Wisps of smoke rise to the ceiling,  
The fragrance of bread, warm and fresh.

(Alien Bread 34) [Z](#)

One can also imagine in this scene the sounds associated with early evening: the chirping of birds and the croaking of frogs. How ironic that this idyllic vision of childhood space is inspired in the mind of someone biting into something so foreign and undesirable as alien bread and not a madelaine! Several other poems in *Alien Bread* speak of the earth as a warm grave: "Where could you find meaning for your pain / Without the warmth of Lithuanian graves," (Kur berastum savo vargui prasme, / Be lietuviškų kapelių šilimos,) ("Tremtiniui Tėvui" [For My Exiled Father] 19), thus strengthening the vision of the *žemė* as Earth / mother, the womb, as well as the final resting place. A religious level of meaning is suggested here of the childhood paradise as something to return to in the afterlife. A similar effect is achieved in the poem "Ūkininkai," (The Farmers):

Slow and heavy is our procession  
Towards the peaks of the clay hills  
The earth disciplines and forgives us  
And covers us with her clear, fine sands.

Lėta ir sunki mūsų eisena  
Molėtų kalvų keterom.  
O žemė ir baudžia ir teisinga  
Ir užpila smiltim tyrom.

(11)

In this poem, the Earth figures as a parent as well as a god who punishes and yet forgives the weary travelers of their sins by sprinkling them with the purifying sands of time. The motion of covering the travelers with sand can also be read as a motherly tucking into bed of the child, as well as a burial — a return to the unity the subject has longed for ever since he was separated from his beloved *žemė*.

## Existential Homeland

Meaning itself is another explanation of the subject's desire for the *žemė* / earth. The subject of *Alien Bread* is a farmer. His life is fundamentally tied to the cycles of nature and its harvests. The narrator underlines this link beautifully by making the farmer a part of the land and the land a part of the farmer. As stated at the beginning of this article, the soil is composed of the farmer's blood, tears, sweat, and the ashes of his ancestors. The soil fertilizes the crops and thus provides physical sustenance to the farmer until the time comes for him to return to the earth and continue the cycle.

Separation from the land in this context becomes all the more agonizing because it is the land that defines the subject's existence. The bitter taste of the Adriatic wine and the alien bread in the poems "As the Grapes Ripen" and "Alien Bread"

reflect the subject's pain as he passively watches a foreign harvest or eats bread made from grains raised by somebody else's hands.

Oh, if only I could accompany the clouds north,  
To the silence of spring,  
When the blood of MY LAND will *flow* there  
The warm white sap of the white birches.

O kad taip su debesim į šiaurę,  
Kai ten bus pavasarėjanti tyla,  
Kai lašės MANOSIOS žemės kraujas —  
Šilto pagirio baltų beržų sula.  
(“Vynuogėms nokstant [As the Grapes Ripen] 26, my emphasis)

Bradūnas's subject is not tempted by the boiling wine ripening on the vines of the Adriatic coast. He longs for what is his; what he has created with his own hands, or at least what the soil, composed of his blood and sweat, has produced. It is only at home, at work on his land, that his blood begins to flow, that he feels and understands his purpose in life.

## In Conclusion: Cultural and Psychic Homeland

The choice of words *Svetimoji Duona* (alien or foreign bread) in the title of the collection and throughout the poems is not accidental. Bread is an essential / fundamental food for both physical and spiritual sustenance, as the phrase 'the bread of life' conveys, however, its ingredients and the way it is prepared vary from culture to culture and from family to family. It is the symbol of life and afterlife, as well as the symbol of culture. The adjective 'svetimoji' (foreign, alien) added to 'duona' (bread) has a powerful effect, implying almost a danger or fear about the very source of one's nourishment. The title 'Alien Bread' cannot help but refer to the lack in itself, and therefore to the desire for a 'familiar / native' bread, indicating a desire for the land and the nation (motherland) that produced it.

The discourse of *Alien Bread* reflects and elicits nationalist yearning by invoking the symbols of Lithuanian culture and the memories of Lithuania's geographical landscape: bells ring in Vilnius churches and in the humble wooden chapels of the countryside; Bradūnas's subject recalls the white of the birch forests and the blue of the flax fields; he calls out to the great river Nemunas. He speaks of the ancient burial mounds and the ancestors buried within them; he links the soil (žemė) to the heavens by calling it 'šventa' (holy).

The idyllic vision of home and childhood eventually is transformed into a vision of eternity. Just as the land purified and buried Bradūnas's weary travelers with its fine sands, the mother will eventually call the subject to return to her tender embrace. The poem "Tenai" ("There") can be seen as suggesting the completion of this cyclical journey: "Eternity motions her hand / And like Mother / She caresses me, an infant. / It is there that I long to fall asleep, /" (There, 35).<sup>8</sup> The tension between the painful present and the sweet childhood memories of home, nation, and culture comes to rest, and the subject can sleep. Exile then is understood as temporary. Although it is always impossible to return to the space and time fixated in one's memory, eternity offers a solution. This eternity has religious implications, but it can also be understood on another level as the individual or collective myths that help forge identity.

<sup>1</sup> The masculine noun "sons" is intentional — the relationship of Bradūnas's subject to the land is the relationship of a son to his mother. The only role for woman here is that of nurturer.

<sup>2</sup> Kazys Bradūnas, "Tolimas vakaras" 45 (Distant Evening), and "Vakaras ant svetimų laukų" 20 (Evening on Foreign Fields) *Svetimoji duona*, (Alien Bread) Munich: *Aidų* leidinys, 1945. All translations of Bradūnas's poetry into English are my own. Because the translator has limited poetic abilities, the meaning of the verses has been foregrounded at the expense of rhythm and style. Further citations from this text will be referenced with title of poem and page number.

<sup>3</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc. 1977, especially p. 4 on the distinction between *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt*.

<sup>4</sup> It is easy to see why feminist critics would take issue with the agency-less mother, who, unable to control her maternal feelings, requires a father figure to tell her when it's time to wean the infant.

<sup>5</sup> Francois Regnault, "The Name-of-the-Father," R. Feldstein, B. Fink and M. Jaanus, eds. *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Albany, NY: SUNY UP, 1995, 66.

<sup>6</sup> The terms filiation (the sense of unity by virtue of birth, nationality and profession) and affiliation (the sense of unity by virtue of social / cultural / economic / historical forces) are Edward Said's from his book *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983. The term 'disfiliation' is my adaptation, referring to the damage to the sense of self caused by exile.

<sup>7</sup> Man svetima duona valgant, / Kąsnį baisiai nuryti sunku, / Kai aš ją, kaip šventąją alga, / Ne iš žemės — iš rankų imu. / Ir akyse vis vakaro vaizdas — / Saulė leidžias... sodyba... kerčia... / Krosnies dūmai dar palubę sklaidos, / Kvepia duona, šilta ir šviežia... Svetimoji duona (34)

<sup>8</sup> "Amžinybė ranką kelia / Ir kaip motina mane / Kūdikio dienose glosto. / Norisi užmigti tenai, / ..." (Tenai, 35).