

## Dawn of Free Criticism in Soviet Lithuanian Literature

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### 1. Criticism or Revisionism?

It would probably be going too far to compare *Studentai* (the Students), a novel by Vytautas Rimkevičius that appeared in occupied Lithuania several years ago, with *Not By Bread Alone*, by Vladimir Dudintsev, or Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. The author of *Studentai* is a young Lithuanian writer, almost completely unknown except to the several thousands who read and admired his book, while the two Russian novels were considered events of world literary importance and one even received the Nobel Prize for Literature. *Studentai* was published officially, by the State Publishing House in Vilnius, though it had to seek an underground path to the West.

It is probable that these works are not of equal literary merit, although it might be argued that no Soviet work is valuable by literary or esthetic criteria alone. For we cannot forget that in the Soviet Union literature, as well as art, is primarily a social function. The only literary school fostered by the government, socialist realism, itself indicates the criteria to be used in judging its products: The judgment must be based primarily on sociological grounds, not esthetic ones. Therefore the novels of Pasternak and Dudintsev would not have evoked as much comment as they did on their literary merits alone.

And these sociological criteria justify comparing *Studentai* with the above-mentioned novels, as Soviet critics have done. These authors are called revisionists and decadents; they are condemned as writers of "black literature" and as being under the influence of bourgeois trends. Actually all these terms, like the vaunted concept of socialist realism itself, have been devised by the Soviets themselves and have no clearly defined meanings; they are clichés or slogans that are given meanings to fit the need. The very indeterminacy of the terms makes them dangerous, in the same way that the dreaded term "enemy of the people" (which at the moment, fortunately, is going out of fashion) was dangerous in Stalin's time.

In these novels — **Doctor Zhivago**, **Not By Bread Alone**, **Studentai**, Marek Hlasko's **The Cemetery**, and a number of others that have appeared in the Soviet Union, China and the satellites — the spirit of free criticism appears for almost the first time in the Communist world. It is true that it was possible and even mandatory to criticize before, but the objects of this criticism could be only the enemies of the Soviet regime — bourgeois nationalists, capitalists, priests — and never the Soviet order itself. Since Lenin's announcement that the opposition possesses only a single right, the right to prison, criticism of the Soviet system has been impossible, just as those differences of opinion that are the basis of true criticism have been impossible.

Now *Doctor Zhivago* himself, and Dudintsev's *Lomakin*, and Rimkevičius' *Lincijus* not only dare to criticize, but they elevate criticism to occupy a place among the basic principles of human progress. At one point *Liucijus* muses as follows: "Free criticism. We can criticize, whatever we wish.... In criticizing we seek." This is an expression of a new spirit that can be found from China to the Baltic and Adriatic Seas and which up to now has been rarely noted in Soviet literature.

There can be no question that the Soviets fear criticism of this type more than they fear anything else, for it presupposes differences of opinion and freedom. In another place "It seemed to him that his time was coming, that his hopes were being fulfilled. In class today he had said that our literature was primitive, unworthy of being studied by the people. Few had dared to contradict him. The Young Communists were silent. Perhaps they disagreed with *Liucijus*, but they remained silent. "Pasternak expresses the same ideas, transferred from the university to a more universal level, as he muses in the epilogue of his work that "the portents of freedom filled the air throughout the postwar period, and they defined its historical

significance."

In their war against that epochal manifestation, free criticism, the Soviets devised the concepts of revisionism, deviationism, political Daltonism and others. The fear of criticism and freedom is the greatest fear of any totalitarian regime: This is why Pasternak was ejected from the Writer's Union and threatened with exile from the Soviet Union; this is why Rimkevičius' novel was prevented from reaching the West. This may be the only fear the Communists have, for they can make atomic and other weapons, they can achieve technological progress and turn deserts into productive land, but they can never permit their people the right of free criticism. And this constitutes one of the great problems of the age, a problem that manifests itself primarily in literature and art, since art without freedom or a thirst for freedom is completely impossible.

## 2. The Sad Balance of Soviet Literature

Up to now the Soviet leaders have been of the opinion that it is better not to have a literature than to risk the disintegration of the Soviet empire. Liucijus' just-quoted description of the primitive state of literature is a sad but indubitable truth, and it applies not only to occupied Lithuania but to the whole of the Soviet Union. This was admitted by M. Sholokhov at the Second Congress of Soviet Writers in 1954 (that is, immediately after Stalin's death). And as recently as this year, Alexei Surkov, secretary of the Soviet Writer' Union, admitted to a correspondent of the German periodical "Der Monat" that during the last two decades of the Stalin era only three worth-while novels had been published: Vol. 4 of Sholokhov's **And Quiet Flows the Don**, Vol. 3 of Alexei Tolstoy's **Ordeals** and the final volume of the same author's **Peter the First** ("Der Monat," September, 1958). And of the younger poets he could mention only Tvardovsky.

The darkest period, the true Dark Ages, of Russian literature is approximately the years 1934 to 1954, or the period between the First and Second Writer' Union Congresses. This is at the same time pre-animently the age of socialist realism. At the first congress this dogma was solemnly proclaimed as the only esthetic possible in the Soviet Union. It can be said that with the death of Maxim Gorky, in 1936, Russian literature also died. It is no exaggeration to say that these two decades contributed almost nothing to Russian literature. It is understandable that even Pasternak was silent during this time.

If this is the balance of Russian literature during this time, the balance of the literatures of Soviet-occupied nations is an even sadder one. The strict formula that these literatures be "socialist in content and national in form" placed them in a real Procrustes' bed. Most of the nations that fell trader Soviet domination in 1918-1920 could not even begin to create a national literature, while others, such as the Baltic states, which were occupied in 1940, were forced to forget their literary traditions and sing the only permissible song, the "song of Stalin." And such leftist Lithuanian writers as Saloméja Neris and Petras Cvirka, who had matured in independent Lithuania, were sadly disappointed with socialist realism and wrote nothing of literary value after 1940. They were shackled by the formula "socialist in content and national in form." Petras Cvirka (1909-1947) complained in the last of his minor pieces that it was easier for the Russians to adapt themselves to these conditions, since after all it had been they who had created them. And Saloméja Neris (1904-1945) experienced a profound artistic and personal tragedy as early as 1940-1941, as can be seen from the memoirs of her friend Ignas Malenas ("Aidai," June, 1958).

There can be no doubt that the same feelings prevailed in the satellites, the so-called people's democracies. Their feelings are best represented by the already mentioned Marek Hlasko (b. 1930), who gave his novel the symbolic name *The Cemetery*. Hlasko chose as a motto for this novel a passage from Gogol's *Dead Souls*: "There is only one decent man amongst us; but even he, to tell the truth, is a pig." Hlasko was subjected to severe criticism and was forced to seek asylum in West Berlin.

## 3. But Miracles Do Happen, After All

The mood experienced by the Soviet people during these two decades reminds one of Palestine during the times of Herod (37- 4 B.C.) and John The Baptist. For all of the vast technical and architectural progress for which Herod was called "the Great" — as Stalin, too, sometimes is — the oppressed people of Palestine had nothing to look forward to but a miracle. And that miracle; it was curred. Stalin's death was a similar miracle; it was followed by what is called in chemistry a chain reaction. Galina Nikolaeva shows this very well in her novel **A Battle on the Way**. (In 1957, "Soviet Literature" began to publish an English version of this work; according to my information, at least, it has never appeared in book form in Russia.) She begins her story with Stalin's funeral, which everyone hoped was to bring something new, though what no one so far could or dared to prophesy.

Possibly the first to define this hope was Ilya Ehrenburg, who is always most courageous when the danger is least and always something of a coward when the danger is real. Perhaps on this account, he was awarded many Stalin prizes. His novel **The Thaw**, which is insignificant as literature but interesting as a historical and sociological phenomenon, appeared in 1954. The name is, of course, symbolic, and in the novel he analyzed Soviet reality in a timid but still critical manner. His novel received great, and probably unmerited, notice inside and outside the Soviet Union. Some have called the whole period "the Thaw."

Many who had not yet shaken off the Stalinist traditions, especially among the writer-bureaucrats who had been so favored by Stalin, were alarmed at Ehrenburg's mild criticism and irony, and a flood of attacks on him appeared in the press. And while Sholokhov and others were courageously criticizing the literature of the 1934-1954 period at the Second Writers' Union Congress in 1954, Ehrenburg was humbly apologizing and promising to sin no more.

Nevertheless, a new and unexpected miracle occurred not long after. This was Khrushchev's famous de-Stalinization speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1955. Although this speech was secret and was never printed in the Communist press, it received wide publicity in the Soviet Union itself and especially among the satellites, because of Western communications techniques. Some of the ideas contained in the speech, such as the struggle against the cult of personality and against dogmatism, gained wide and open currency in Soviet political and cultural life.

In any case, Khrushchev's critical views of Stalin opened the way to criticism of the Soviet system in general. This showed itself in literature that appeared in 1956-1957, which is sometimes referred to as the age of iconoclasm — an epithet that refers to the reversion from the worship of idols and the open treatment of Soviet reality. Articles attacking the customary gilding of that reality and opposing pompousness and the no-conflict theory appeared. A different view was taken of the so-called literary heritage, and some writers who had nothing in common with revolutionary traditions gained notice. As for the occupied nations, all this meant the rejection of the "socialist in content and national in form" doctrine.

All this did not pass unnoticed in occupied Lithuania and its literature. It was reflected in the Tenth Congress of the Lithuanian Communist Party, held in February, 1958. At the congress no less a personage than Antanas Sniečkus, First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party, stated, "Any nihilism concerning the Lithuanian literary and artistic heritage, from the viewpoint of the people's art, is foreign to us." At another point he said, "In unmasking the bourgeois order, we Communists place a high value on all that was created by the Lithuanian people in various fields during the bourgeois years". Sniečkus went so far as to chastise the writer J. Paukštėlis because he painted in his novel **Pirmieji Metai (The First Years)** too bleak a picture of life in bourgeois Lithuania. This same Sniečkus brought out the need for a true valuation of Dr. Vincas Kudirka, who up to this time was never even mentioned.

It is not surprising that the literary critics went somewhat further than the Party secretary. It is primarily pure literature, pure art that they seek in the literary heritage; at the same time however, they come in contact with the content of that literature, and they seek here new inspiration for present-day literature. And thus in late 1957 and early 1958 an interesting polemic arose between two noted critics, Vytautas Kubilius and Kazys Ambrasas, concerning the literary heritage of Balys Sruoga, a writer of independent Lithuania. The first, representing the critical tendency, dared to write that Sruoga's ideas had given a new direction to the Lithuanian literary tradition founded by Vaižgantas and now being continued by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, another writer of independent Lithuania who after a long silence had recently published a historical-patriotic novel, **Sukilėliai (The Rebels)**. Such a daring idea appeared unacceptable to K. Ambrasas, who more or less represented the Party line. He did not reject either Sruoga or Vaižgantas or Mykolaitis-Putinas, but he expressed the hope that the younger writers might learn stylistic mastery from them while remaining uncontaminated by their bourgeois ideas — a very popular concept in Soviet literature.

When the writers and critics engaged in this more sober evaluation of the literature of the past, they could not help comparing it with Soviet literature and noting how insignificant the latter really was. It is in this sense that Liucijus' musings in *Studentai* must be understood. Obviously it was necessary to seek the causes of this state of affairs. And they were forced to the natural conclusion that a chief cause of this literary decline was the insincerity of the writing. In spite of all the so-called demands of socialist realism, it was necessary to present a blasted view of life in order to please the Party. And this resulted in the pomposity, empty heroics and avoidance of conflict that even now the Party critics are condemning.

#### 4. "Black Literature" or the Search for Truth?

Once the above-mentioned traits of "Stalinist" literature were abandoned, it was not difficult to take the next step and present Soviet reality as it really is. Therefore many writers engaged in attempts to correct the biased view contained in the earlier works; during these attempts they could not avoid revealing those dark spots that up to now they had been forced to conceal.

Obviously, to the dogmatic critics who followed the old line any work that attempted to be critical of the Soviet system amounted to libel. To describe such libel they coined the term "black literature" and applied it to the works of Nikolaeva, Dudintsev, Hlasko and, of course, Pasternak. They went so far as to consider these writers an organized group working against the Soviet system. If this were so, then they must have their roots in the capitalist West and its "decadent" literature. Joyce, Camus and especially Kafka became, in the eyes of the dogmatic critics, inspirers and protagonists of the "black literature." Actually, they could have found examples of this "black" writing much closer to home — in Khrushchev's famous speech for example, which described with great clarity the macabre atmosphere that reigned during the final years of Stalin's life.

Basically, the so-called "black literature" is nothing else but an attempt by certain writers to expose the "big lie that had blanketed the whole of the Soviet Union. In this sense we can agree with Pasternak when he told a Swedish correspondent that in the Soviet Union one must hate what man loves and love what man hates. We can easily imagine

the difficulties a writer finds himself in when he is asked to keep in close touch with Soviet life yet at the same time to depict it as other than it really is. His situation becomes still worse when he is asked to abandon the techniques of "Stalinist" literature.

But when he attempts to criticize that reality, however mildly, as Rimkevičius did in *Studentai*, he becomes the target of savage attacks. In Rimkevičius case we might quote R. Lukinskas that the novelist "has surrendered to the easy fashion of criticizing the negative aspects of life without having considered from what positions and with what aims he criticises" ("*Literatūra ir menas*") ("*Literature and Art*"), April 26, 1958). The critic does not attempt to show that the writer errs in thus depicting Soviet life; he bases his criticism on the fact that it may hurt the Soviet system and help its enemies.

It would not seem that all those writers who today are called revisionists or deviationists have these dark aims in mind. In reality, their primary concern is simply literature and art. The noted critic J. Lankutis may have guessed their intentions correctly when he wrote "It is very pleasing that today we argue less about what kind of poetry is the best — the so-called people's, or pure lyrical, or descriptive, or narrative, etc. Obviously we need all kinds; what is important is that the poetry be good, and that it foster good ideas and feelings" ("*Pergalė*" ("*Victory*") June, 1958).

But good poetry and prose is always that poetry and prose which is faithful to itself, which does not give an artificial misrepresentation of life but is based on the truth as the writer sees it. The writer must first of all be faithful to himself, to his thoughts and feeling. The young critic R. Rostovaitė has written an interesting article to this effect, with the symbolic title "The Most Beautiful Song-Truth" ("*Pergalė*," July, 1958). At the beginning of the article she pays her due to the misty Communist truth, but she goes on to write about the truth of reality, of feeling of experience, the truth of literary methods and the comprehension of one's era. As might be expected, she was subjected to sharp criticism for this article from the conformist side. Nevertheless, the fact that such ideas can be discussed at all in the Lithuanian press is a very encouraging sign.

J. Dovydaitis has been even bolder. Among other things, he came out in defense of the widely read short story *Padaigos Mirtis* (The Death of *Padaiga*), by the young writer A. Markevičius. Many critics, among them K. Ambrasas, not only condemned the book as an example of "black literature" but also attempted to impugn its literary value. "It is strange that some critics have greeted this young writer as a complete vilifier of reality," J. Dovydaitis wrote of these critics ("*Literatūra ir menas*," June, 1958. "Such a view of a writer's observations and his sincere desire to condemn what he considers to be evil reminds one of the belchings of yesterday's critics-vulgarizers." He goes on to say that the primary asset of a writer is courage. As for the novel's literary worth, this is sufficiently proved by the fact that the Poles quickly translated the novel and published it in the magazine "*Przyjazn*" ("*Friendship*"). In general, the Soviets use the tactic of denigrating the literary worth of any work that is ideologically unacceptable, as if they were greatly concerned about literary values.

It is gratifying to note that in spite of threats and attacks we find even among Lithuanian writers some who pledge themselves to follow art and truth. It will suffice to mention the names of a few younger writers. In this category we find Justinas Marcinkevičius (b. 1930), some of whose poetry — especially his **Poemas apie žodžius (Poems on Words)** is marked not only by its high artistic quality but also by a profound experience of reality. Another young writer is Algimantas Baltakis (b. 1930), whose collection **Velnio Tiltas (The Devil's Bridge)** is unquestionably an example of good lyric poetry. Still another is Kazys Saja (v. 1932), whose comedy **Septynios ožkenos (The Seven She-Goats)** satirizes the evils of Soviet life. Even E. Maželaitis and A. Jonynas have recently written some good poems with a deep insight into real life and the human soul.

Consideration of these and other writers leads one to the conclusion that something new is being born in Soviet Lithuanian literature. Obviously, these are only scattered phenomena; there is a great distance to go before a full and sincere literary life is achieved. Attacks on these writers have been stepped up recently, giving rise to great anxiety and fear that literature will return to the age of cruel dogmatism rather than continuing its development in the direction of truth and creative freedom. This will to some extent be clarified during the forthcoming Third Writer's Union Congress, for which feverish preparations are now being made. This Congress will show whether Soviet Lithuanian literature can continue to use the privilege, however slight, of free criticism or will it regress to the "Dark Ages". Without doubt, its further development will depend upon the answer to this question.