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CHALLENGE TO ARCADIA Notes on Soviet Lithuanian Poetry

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Except for some moments of greatness, Lithuania has generally been one of the lesser centers of world history, a star of the second magnitude, on the outer fringes of the galaxy of Western civilization. Between the two world wars it was predominantly an agricultural society, somewhat conservative, not very rich, slow paced. Its cultural life — the arts and letters — centered more on summoning up remembrances of things past than on building the future. And yet its poets, being only human, perceived this country in their visions as their sun. For them, the undeveloped countryside became Arcadia, a land of ancient myth and of fresh green beauty. The peasant's way of life became a virtue, the lack of asphalt roads and factories — a blessing. There was a comforting sense of identity — the poets, and those who read them, shared the feeling that this image of Lithuania was something they belonged to themselves and could therefore love.

In this article I will discuss the challenge to this Arcadia and describe briefly the several different ways in which it was met by the contemporary Soviet Lithuanian poets.

First, the challenge. When the Baltic countries were re-occupied by the Soviet Union in 1944, they became integral units of a much larger political-economic complex than they could possibly have developed themselves. After an extended, often bitter and bloody resistance, their people had to accept the collectivization of agriculture, and the buildup of heavy industry which served the purposes of the whole Soviet empire rather than their own modest needs. The tempo of life increased considerably, as did the suffering, confusion over national and cultural identity. To the degree that Lithuanians became members of a multinational state, they had to face pressure of cosmopolitanization, of joining the so-called "great Soviet family." Since the biggest brother in this family was Russian, the new "proletarian internationalism" in effect amounted to russification.

Thus, the sudden and violent entrance of the poets' pastoral Lithuania into the modern world appeared to the people more as a catastrophe than a breakout from age-old stagnant pattern of living. The point is that this was not their own revolution. It was brought to the country by an alien people committed to an alien ideology. The invaders and masters spoke a different language and had different dreams, but demanded that Lithuanians identify themselves with their frightening new world which, they said, was the future home of all mankind.

What made this challenge even more difficult was the fact that the Russians had previously been an Arcadian people themselves. The Lithuanians remembered them from the past as a nation of serfs, backward peasants whose life-style and education was considerably more primitive than their own. They were not convinced that these new Russians, with all their tractors, technology, and artillery, were all that different from their fathers. Would the acceptance of their world mean giving up something much more than what the Russians had to offer in return? And how does a writer, with such doubts in his mind, fulfill the role of an "engineer of human souls," as Stalin had defined once so charmingly the role of a man of letters in Soviet society.

A fairly easy way to do this would be actually to sing the praises of engineering, and a number of poets did exactly that in the early postwar years of Soviet rule. There was "Socialist construction" going on; anyone who could rhyme and write verses with a regular beat could join the riveters with their jack-hammers and stamp out propaganda pieces about the building of a strong and happy Soviet Lithuania. Such was the first response from Arcadia to the challenge of the new day. Writers like Antanas Venclova, a Communist and a poet of some small talent, did their best to sing in tune with the five-

year plans and produced poems such as the following one, written in 1947, about the building of a hydroelectric plant. I have translated only an excerpt from it:

*Blocks of concrete, settling down,
Blocked and bound and dammed the river,
And the furious strength of man
Changed all nature stubbornly.
Waves were rolling, boiling, thrashing,
Howling, foaming, fiercely,
Like the desert horses, running
Wild and frightened through the dale.*

*Angry river quieted down
Bound by steel and by cement,
And the light broke shining bright
In the whirl of chandeliers —
It was swinging, like the sun,
Splashed itself with milk and fire,
Played and sparkled in the mountains,
Flew, like arrow, radiantly.*

*A new city started shining,
Turning thousands of turbines;
Hummed and flew the forest branches
Past the fast electric trains
Stretching out on mountain slopes.
And the nature gave its thanks,
Noble and generous, to man.*

Among the poets who wrote in this vein, there were some who, like Venclova himself, or Teofilus Tilvytis, or Mykolaitis - Putinas, were established writers belonging to the older generation. Most of them did not become Communists, but they did want to remain poets, even at the price of their creative freedom. Sometimes it is hard to imagine how an artist explains to himself the prostitution of his talent. Perhaps some were identifying with the Florentine artists, who painted Madonnas and Last Judgments for their wealthy patrons. A false comparison, but a comforting one.

Others, such as Eduardas Mieželaitis, Justinas Marcinkevičius, or Algimantas Baltakis, came to maturity as artists during these early years of the Soviet regime. There really was no other way for them to develop their talent, except through the rhetoric of socialist realism and socialist construction. Throughout the troubled and often bloody years of Stalin's rule, the poets maintained an optimistic, triumphant tone; if they did not, the whips of the Party-sponsored critics soon revived their flagging spirits. Needless to say, their poetry became even further removed from any contact with reality that the most exalted visions of the prewar Arcadians, who at least spoke the truth that lay in their own hearts.

The cheerful, up-beat mood of Lithuanian poetry changed toward lyricism and sorrow after 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev opened a small crack in the gates of freedom. Only then could one begin to see what darkness had gathered in the souls of the poets who had been singing so vigorously the joys of socialist construction. Perhaps the most somber voice was that of Janina Degutyté, then still a young woman, but old and wise in the ways of suffering, because of a number of tragic experiences in her own life. Her poetry strives, as much as political conditions permit, to reconstruct an image of Lithuania, including those features of bitter truth which had been covered over with the tinfoil of official optimism before. She depicted Lithuania, in the idiom of folk imagery, as if it were a linen towel spread out to dry in the sun. where the ornamental tulips were red with the real blood of all the victims, not just those of the German occupation. Degutyté remembered both the dead anti-Soviet guerillas in the forests and her own father, apparently shot by the German, in the same cadences of folk laments. This, together with the clanking machinery of urbanization and socialization, composes, in her poetry, the new face of the nation.

Another important effort by Lithuanian poets to assert an indigenous identity under the pressures of the modern age might be described as a kind of retrenchment, a retreat into the inner resources of the native language. Against the largely cosmopolitan language of urbanization, the poets put forward their native folk idiom; against the new cranes, roads, and towers—the forest moss, the flight of the bird, the green leaves of summer. Not only Degutyté but other young poets as well — Judita Vaičiūnaitė, Sigitas Geda, Albinas Bernotas, and many more — turned to the peasant's life, to ancient mythology, to the legendary stones of the country's capital Vilnius in search of an inner strength and assurance with which to confront the threatening winds of change. A poem by Degutyté, entitled "To Lithuania," sums up fairly well the values and attitudes of these poets:

*From whispering dunes and clouds that play with light and shadow
From tremulous sea and lakeshore dressed in reeds,*

*From fragrant bread and from the song of ancient forests
The native speech was put into your lips.*

*Burned clean and smelted in Pilėnai fires
To the transparency of amber light
It sleeps in lullabies of serfdom mother used to sing
It weeps amidst the empty sands of Pirčiupis.*

*The golden meadows speak in native tongue
To wooden crosses, gray and bent by time,
It rings in tall bell towers, and it rises from the streets
Whose cobblestone faces, moist with rain, are looking at the sky.*

*The native word remains in letters red with blood
On walls of stony dungeons, buried in the ashes.
In crossroads of the world — near Baltic Sea close by to River Nemunas,
Your fate will speak to you in mother's tongue.*

*So you could call your joy, which, like a singing bird,
Would stay with you until your journey's end,
From fragrant bread and from the song of ancient forests
The native speech was put into your lips.*

Pilėnai was a medieval fortress whose defendants burned themselves to death rather than surrender to the Germans, and Pirčiupis was a village whose inhabitants were all burned, together with their houses, during a punitive Nazi raid in World War II.

Thus, while the present-day conditions in Lithuania comprise a pattern increasingly similar to that of the rest of the Soviet Union, where the dominant features are acceptance of the regime, gradual russification, and industrial growth, the poets are creating a different image, a new Arcadia, distinguished by deep commitment to its own tragic history, unbending will to survive, and a fragile inner life of subtle emotions that follow every nuance of nature. Nature is especially important for these Lithuanian poets, for it is used as a metaphor for national identity, because in its constant cyclical repetitions nature presents a timeless continuum that can only be broken by the peremptory intrusion of man armed with lifeless technology. The comparisons are obvious: the soul of the people is like nature itself, and the intruder is the alien Soviet power. Some poets go even deeper in their search for timelessness, into the realm of myth, retracing the ancestral memory of their nation from the faint markings that have survived in folk legends and songs and in pagan religious artifacts resting in archaeological museums. The effort seems to be to establish in the consciousness a simultaneity of past and present on a timeless plane which is the dimension of legend and myth. As an example, we may take a short poem by Judita Vaičiūnaitė, entitled "The Stone With a Horseshoe," from the cycle "Ancient Markings:"

*The axe of flint falls silent in the mist.
And in the mist the ancient sculptures drown.
The smell of juniper and fir-trees grows sharper in the mist,
And back into the mist the larks are flying
 the villages turn back into the mist...
And, through the rain, again, I hear
 the horseshoe chiselled in the stone,
the rustling rye,
 the distant neighing of a steed just, broken in...*

The all-enveloping mist is a kind of metaphorical medium through which the poet's consciousness moves, disengaged from time sequences between the present and the past in the intimate inner world, unreachable to those who cannot read the secret code of the special Lithuanian ethnic identity. Another young poet, Sigitas Geda, reaches out to a particular historical period in his book called *Strazdas*, which is the name of a Lithuanian poet-priest who lived in the nineteenth century and was both famous and notorious for his maverick character, cheerfully ignoring social and ecclesiastical conventions, and for his great, sunny love for the peasant serfs tilling the soil. Geda's basic intent is to transfigure the harsh and gloomy realities of peasant life in those times by the power of his own love, translated into poetic imagery, so that the past would begin to glow with a golden warmth without yet losing its plain, even coarse, simplicity, or the attending shadows of pain, hunger, and fear. As was the case with Degutytė and Vaičiūnaitė, Geda's poetry is essentially rural, essentially Arcadian, close to nature, impenetrable and mysterious to those forces that are destroying it. Therein, paradoxically, lies one of the keys to the universality of the Lithuanian situation, for it is a common experience of many advanced industrial civilizations to stand in awe of the mystery of nature while at the same time pushing its bulldozers right through the magic woods and canyons to make room for progress in the shape of some housing development or other.

One interesting feature of this new Arcadian poetry is the conscious development of the folkloristic style. Rural speech cadences, imagery and symbolism are used to create new and sophisticated verse which conveys much more than merely

the peasant's experience of life. The result is a kind of "bookish folklore," an "intellectual folk idiom" which the peasants have never heard, but which is based upon their language patterns and extended further into poetic structures originating in urban tradition. This urge to develop the native inheritance to a higher degree of sophistication may well result from an awareness on the part of the poets that a retreat to ethnic culture has its dangers and disadvantages. The spirit of a people cannot really survive without some measure of greatness, and greatness requires emotional and intellectual scope, with a range of cultural interests at least to some degree commensurate with the mainstream of world civilization. By clinging too long to the grass roots, a nation may never grow taller than grass. There are signs indicating that the Soviet regime also understands this inherent weakness and takes advantage of it by encouraging the specifically ethnic self-expression in precisely this folksy, rural mode, so that the ethnic separateness might gradually become identified with the marginal, the trivial aspects of culture, while the brightest, most ambitious talents would be tempted toward larger horizons, to the great cities of the Soviet Union, where they would blend with the dominant Russian civilization. The choice offered by the regime seems to be either to move ahead with the times, or to remain an isolated nation of village idiots.

Some of the most talented poets do not concede this to be the only choice and are groping for a means of self-expression which would encompass the highest cosmopolitan values while yet preserving a unique Lithuanian identity. At the present time, one may distinguish two basic directions in which this search is developing. The first of these, exemplified in the work of Judita Vaičiūnaitė, seeks out complex and subtle shadings of highly personal, yet also universal, emotions, such as erotic love, framing these in an urban setting. The Arcadian muse of Vaičiūnaitė thus often finds herself wandering among city pavements, arcades, colonnades, conjuring up poetry from stone by the force of her physical, organic experience of love. Here, for example, are three excerpts from a cycle entitled "The Passions of Spring":

*In hotbed city of high fever
you're treating me to mother's wine,
red like the blazing sun of roses.
At night we're like an arch — so grown together in embrace.*

*And in the daytime —
I live alone and wild and breathless in my ecstasy
Dusty, burned-out pavements.
From them — an upward dive
toward ambiguous light,
For us so brimful of a childish tearfulness,
and lust, and restlessness.
Hot stains of wine
upon my dress and floor, and on the ground.
Arching, interlacing filaments of fingers.
Burning blaze roses. June.*

.....
*The sun. The sidewalk cafe. The fountain spray.
Your pulse and mine
throbbing fate and freedom.
Light falls on hands beloved
only once.
Take this ambiguous emptiness, and bitterness, and silence.
A helpless, empty face.
And then the sun — the fountain spray.
Flowing together into one — and growing —
your pulse and mine.*

.....
*A white-hot city. Poplar down.
Glass moon is turning
(glass works getting dark).
I love you for your hidden light,
and for fragility, for timbre...
You will be mine, you are, you have been.
Homeless pigeons waddling
on walls that stay warm through the night.
White-hot nerves
(we quietly lost our minds).*

.....

*The city ringed by poplar down, so satin-white.
Down go the trucks on the highway.
My yearning, blown up like a figure of glass,
I'd give back to you (there are no hands gentler than yours) —
Poplar down (there are no lips softer than yours) —
You will be mine, you are, you have been.*

The second direction, represented mainly by the work of Tomas Venclova, the son of the hydroelectric poet quoted before, turns to a kind of bookish intellectualism. Young Venclova's verse is extraordinarily complex in texture, with numerous intertwining allusions to literature of all nations, and ages, and it weaves a pattern of hope for man as a contemplating individual, living in the only ultimately meaningful reality — the reality which consists of the creations of his own mind. Venclova is thus reminiscent of such intellectual poets as John Donne in the seventeenth century and Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot today. Except for the exile poet Henrikas Radauskas, there have been only faint traces of this type of poetry in the Lithuanian tradition. One might therefore say that Venclova's response to the challenge of the time contributes not so much to the preservation of an old artistic and national identity as to the creation of a new one.

Among Baltic exiles, it is good manners to end papers such as this, dealing with spiritual resistance to Soviet rule in the home countries, on an optimistic note. In truth, however, if there is to be any bright future for Lithuanian letters and Lithuanian national spirit, it can only be seen through a glass darkly. Withdrawal into indigenous sources of art may, in the end, amount to a kind of cultural death; in such a case, the intellectual and urban poetry would have to exist, if it can, suspended in a vacuum. If it were possible to enjoy frequent and unrestricted cultural exchanges with the West, one could be more hopeful. There is, however, a certain tenacity of spirit, a consciousness of basically Western cultural orientations, and a sense of achievement in present-day Lithuania that may yet enable the poets to find an appropriate response to the challenge of the Soviet technocratic dictatorship.