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THE TRAGEDY OF CREATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: Literary Heritage of Antanas Škėma *

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* Chapter from a projected book on Lithuanian writers in exile, to be published in English.

The death of Antanas Škėma in a highway accident in 1961 brings to mind the fatal crash which took the life of Albert Camus. Death came to both men unexpected at the particular moment, although long-awaited with a terrible, clear-eyed knowledge. It was an absurd way to die and therefore cruelly, ironically appropriate for these men who understood absurdity so well. By his death, Antanas Škėma also vindicated his belief that the absurd and pitiless laws of the universe always require that vengeance shall be exacted upon those who disturb the frozen eternal order by exercising their gift of imagination. In his works, the main protagonists usually perish at the highest point of their creative consciousness, when they become, as it were, rebels against the inherent meaninglessness of the universe. It does not matter that they challenge the world, not as a conqueror would, but in an effort of love, asking only that reality should assent to transfiguration by the spirit of poetry living in the heart of man. If there is God, as we hope there is, and if He is good, as we must believe, the creative effort of man should bring him the reward of fulfillment. What happens instead is that man is obliterated forever in a bottomless void. Škėma's work, therefore, leaves the impression of a tense and worried attempt to puzzle out this impossible state of things. It resembles a torturous and prolonged dialogue with an incomprehensible, silent God, whose presence reveals itself only in the suffering and destruction of man.

Back in the era of romanticism Victor Hugo could pray to God like this:

Je viens à Vous, Seigneur, Père qu'il faut croire,
Je Vous porte à peser
Les morceaux de cet coeur, plein de Votre gloire,
Qui Vous avez brisé.

Škėma's prayer is very different indeed. The people we meet in his works for the most part also carry within themselves pieces of their broken hearts; they search for their Father in whom they also agree that one must believe — some because they are mere children, too small to countenance the possibility of non-belief and, others, because they had been so cruelly punished for the creative and questioning spark they possess that they have become nothing but fearful, obsequious slaves of the nameless Power which struck them. Such a slave is Antanas Garšva in the novel *The White Shroud* (Balta drobulė, 1958), when he prays feeling the vault of madness — the equivalent of death for the poet — closing inexorably over his head:

Lord, You see how unhappy I am.
I know, I come too late, but save me.
I promise.
I will tear up my notes, my poems.
I will not think the way You do not wish.
I will pray.
I will enter a monastery.
Lord, help me at least in my death.

I believe, You forgive at the last moment.
For all of one's life.
Lord, Lord, into Your hands....
Oh, no, I'm just a miserable human being, Lord.
Looooord!¹

Victor Hugo wrote his prayer at a time when people believed in impressive turns of phrase, in beautiful, dramatic gestures which, they knew, would not bring the pillars of the world crashing down about their ears. They thought it possible to tease a little the good God who holds the key to the mysteries of the universe. "Je viens a Vous, Seigneur..." sounds like a noble, even elegant, rebellion against the God who, in His infinite mercy, will surely restrain his wrath. Good and evil will still remain clearly recognizable in the world, and it will be possible to play the Prince of Darkness without jeopardising one's rights to the Kingdom of Heaven. The people in Škēma's works, on the other hand, live in our time, when the pillars of the world have become so shaky that one or two atomic bombs will knock them down altogether. In such a world, games with God are no longer possible — unless played by madmen — and the last prayer of Garšva is a scream of terror coming from a humble and faithful heart filled nonetheless with total despair. We can listen to this scream again in Škēma's play **The Awakening** (Pabudimas, 1956). There is a woman being led to execution by the Soviet secret police; we do not see her on stage, but only hear her voice:

I won't go, I don't want to any more. Let go of my hand, there's a nice fellow, just for a moment, all right, I'll rest for a minute, all right, all right, don't, you're hurting me, I won't go I said — I won't go, all right, don't drag me, I don't want to, I don't, please don't drag me, I don't want to, I don't want to, all right, I don't want to, I don't, I don't, all right...
*(The words turn into a scream, the steps conquer, they drag the woman on. The scream disappears behind the door.)*²

The Communist god here is quite different from that in **The White Shroud**; but, in both instances, the essence of prayer is the same: helpless terror. Both powers are equally immovable. Adam committed the original sin and was punished, but he, at least, tasted of the fruit of Paradise and could know good and evil. Today this fruit is already rotten; we don't know even this much any more, and yet, the punishment goes on.

Such is the first, impression upon reading Škēma. A rebellion, we are told, is an effort to assert one's human dignity. The mighty creative fire of the Renaissance was lit when the long-suffering medieval slave of God stood up and proclaimed his desire to be human. In **The Awakening**, Kazys, a Lithuanian rebel against the Soviet rule, put to terrible and revolting torture, also cries that he wants to be human, but in the middle of his cry: "his face becomes all wrinkles, tears spurt from his eyes, animal groans issue from his throat."

If we listen well, we can hear this horrible scream in every single critical experience undergone by Škēma's protagonists, as if this were the ultimate wisdom, the last word of the philosophers, the final "amen" after the prayer of an innocent child.

Paradoxically, Škēma at times seems capable of hearing a note of triumph in his human cry of despair. This would seem to go against all logic; but Škēma knew, as did Dostoevsky's man from Underground before him, that logic is the province of limited minds — minds that dwell safely inside the walls of what they call reality and therefore cannot begin to understand the quality of a creative act. The finger writes: two and two make four. He who does not believe in happiness is a pessimist. He who tortures and kills is a soulless monster. He who betrays his own people to the enemy is a dis-picable traitor. In Škēma's work, however, two and two may well add up to infinity. His ideas are not abstracted from human experience and cut to manageable size on the writer's desk; they remain as organic parts of a living man, and therefore their nature and validity is subject not to logic, but to the infinite variety of unpredictable human responses to life in which passion, fear, desire and inspiration may well play the dominant part. In **The Awakening**, for instance, the Soviet secret police investigator Pijus attempts to force Kazys, his former successful rival and now an underground hero, to betray resistance secrets by torturing Elena, the woman they both love and Kazys has married, before his rival's very eyes. Pijus continues to love both his captives and also secretly hates them both with the fury of the defeated. Now he wants to win his victory by means of the power given him by an ideology which, as he thinks, stands for the immutable laws of history. Pijus has accepted this ideology, not for its intrinsic values, but for the hypnotic force of its perfect logical design from which he hopes to derive his own personal perfection and invincibility. "The sun," says Pijus, "makes the fragile flower grow; the sun also burns out deserts. Water has the same quality, and so does fire, so does earth itself. In our system man shall acquire his greatest possession: absolute objectivity." As it turns out, however, it is precisely this objectivity that Pijus lacks in the performance of what he thinks is his duty; but actually he makes a desperate and tortured effort to resolve his own endlessly complex dilemma which he himself cannot begin to comprehend. And so he loses again. Having set up the inhuman torture for Kazys and Elena, he cannot bear their suffering and shoots Kazys (on a sudden impulse of pity) without having learned his secrets. Pity has destroyed the invincible force to which Pijus had committed himself. Loving both Kazys and Elena, he has tortured them both; and, while torturing them, he has understood that he possesses no right to do so in the name of his truth because he does love them in human terms. His truth forsakes him, and he himself falls into the hands of Communist police. In his last hour he prays again, striving to believe in a different God, repeating The Lord's Prayer after the priest Antanas, another of his victims. Thus the protagonists all perish, but what remains is stronger than the darkness enveloping them: it is man's love for freedom in the name of which Kazys and Elena die and remain victorious, and man's love for man which constitutes the tragedy and the glory of Pijus. In this way, the noble qualities of

man remain triumphant, and in their agony Škema's heroes receive a priceless gift: the same tragic dimension in which resounds the terrible voice of Christ: "My God, why has Thou forsaken me!"

For this reason, the experience of tragedy in Škema's works can never be described in human terms alone. His protagonists possess the paradoxical ability to function as symbolic representations of the many-faceted relationship between man and God without themselves becoming larger than life. They do not answer to the definition of a tragic hero as someone whose qualities elevate him far above his fellow men; and yet their lives, their passions and sufferings are comprehensible only in relation to an all-encompassing moral and metaphysical idea. In **The Awakening**, as in other works, we meet a number of individuals who seem to be struggling with nothing more than their personal problems, but the outcome of the struggle always implies something about the nature of good, evil and eternity. The priest Antanas, for instance, waits in fear and trembling for his inevitable death, but over and above his anguish there is the much greater agony of constant thought about his sister who committed suicide because Antanas would not allow her to leave the monastery even though she could no longer live the life of the nun without perverting her own humanity. The terrible question that this priest must face in his hour of death is this: is it really true that absolute faith demands an absolute commitment? Perhaps by insisting that his sister remain in the monastery Antanas has actually committed a blasphemy because he has transformed the suffering God into a granite idol, born of man's perverse imagination, no different in essence from the "absolute objectivity" which Pijus professed to believe. His moral principles, turned monstrous without the human quality of mercy, come to haunt him in the horrid nightmare of a toothless, idiotically grinning Madonna. Both Pijus and Antanas are forsaken by their respective gods: the priest because he did not know pity, and the secret police interrogator because he had compassion for human suffering. It is quite appropriate, therefore, that they should both kneel down to pray at the end of the play, searching together for still another God.

A curious facet of Škema's art reveals itself in the handling of his characters. While acting out their lives on the purely human plane, they seem to be aware somehow that what they do has no reality except in terms of the symbolic. They take a strangely impersonal attitude toward their very personal conflicts and very genuine death, as if they knew that all the world is indeed a stage and that they are only acting out their parts in some metaphysical mystery. Kazys and Pijus, for instance, locked in desperate combat, show no personal hatred toward each other but rather the solidarity of two actors performing a terrible ritual. Similarly Elena, after unspeakable tortures and after the death of Kazys, can speak to Pijus with an unearthly calm, explaining to him the issues of their struggle and the reasons for her ultimate victory.

Not only are Škema's heroes symbolic of ideas and forces greater than themselves, but they also gradually blend in the reader's mind into just one single hero — an embodiment of the spirit of poetry in man. We meet this man-poet in various guises in all of Škema's works. He comes to us as a little child in the story "Sunny Days" from a cycle called **Saint Inga** (*Šventoji Inga*, 1952). The time is the Russian revolution, and young Martynukas, together with his father and mother, is on the way to Lithuania to escape the terrors of bolshevism. They do not succeed; the Soviet authorities catch them and execute all three on the spot. This is the outer framework, the story line. The inner action, however, consists of a giant leap by Martynukas into the arms of God. The leap begins in an old orchard, from a rickety stepladder. Martynukas has a friend, Vaska, who wants to play a practical joke on "the dreamer" and tells him that if he would climb on the ladder, shout three times as loud as he can: "God, my God, please show yourself" and then jump down, he would not fall on the ground, but rise up to heaven, to the bosom of the Lord. Martynukas is a poet because he takes words literally, because he assumes that everyone else understands them the same way, and because in his consciousness there is no dividing line between miracle and reality. And so, he jumps:

And he runs to the ladder, he climbs, he shouts hoarsely "God, my God, please show yourself!" and he jumps and falls, and rises again and climbs once more. His white shirt is dirty, his hair disshevelled, his pants are torn, blood is pounding in his temples, he falls, he rises, he climbs ..

— Ha, ha, ha, chee, chee.... laughs Vaska all doubled-up. His laughter grows, expands, laughter inundates all the wide open spaces of the earth, the whole world is laughing, choking with laughter.³

While the world is laughing, Martynukas comes to understand that one must die before he can rise up to God. He remembers the hanged White Guard officers, with their tongues drooping down, suspended from the lampposts halfway up to heaven. He does not remember, but the reader does, Jesus Christ hanging on the cross. Soon it is turn for Martynukas. Stood up against the wall, he screams

and in his scream he understands that his mother is lying on the ground and that he, too, will soon lie there, and that to heaven one must rise, fly and fly, that one cannot lie on the ground if he wishes to see the good Lord. And he clambers up, holding on to his father's thinning hair, puts one foot on his father's shoulder, and the military commissar Vasilevsky pulls out his pistol and squeezes the trigger four times.⁴

Thus for little Martynukas the ultimate poetic experience is death. Škema offers no opinion as to whether Martynukas rose up to heaven or disappeared into the void. Being a poet, he keeps his glance directed to the earth. On the earth we see a good man, Medvedenko, who loved the mother of Martynukas and who now is taking his dead love, as poets do, to be buried on a high hill in the steppe, where there is a grove of acacia trees and a fresh spring runs over cool green stones:

A sweet and sticky smell emanates from the poorly made coffin, the horse can no longer stand the smell, gives the cart a sudden pull and starts running. Medvedenko falls down, a green lizard flashes before his eyes, stiff grass cuts his face, he cries out, stands up, runs after the cart.

Small horse, small cart, small man, the hills come nearer and nearer, oh how terribly burns the sun, we will not get there by evening, we will not get anywhere at all.⁵

In **Saint Inga** there is another cycle of stories called "Three About a Train." Here the image of the poet is embodied in a young man, Ignas, whose life is suspended between two catastrophes — the two world wars of our century. The stories might be said to have an epic dimension of their own, but it is an internal epic, not concerned with the enormous number and complexity of external events, or, rather, concerned only with their terrible meaning on the symbolic plane. The meaning, as Škėma sees it, is betrayal and destruction of all supreme human values. Ignas is a poet at heart because he thinks that love is holy — a communion of saints. Knowing his human limitations, he is therefore afraid of it. Thinking painfully, worshipfully of love, he becomes obsessed with the self-created image of his mother. Because of his poetic turn of mind, his mother must, for him, be the ideal of motherhood, must be Madonna. So, he worships her and is afraid of her, too, and the ideas of love for a woman and love for his mother blend into a single image of sainthood and fear.

It is then that the blow falls. What he sees one night in the orchard might be shocking enough for any man, but for the poetic soul of Ignas it is the ultimate catastrophe and the end of the world: his mother, Madonna, and the high school chaplain are standing there in embrace, lustfully "rubbing their bellies together." The holy light of sainthood fades like an immaterial mask from his own hidden desires and fears, and everything turns into a foul and evil caricature of itself. Ignas was a dreamer — now his world is a nightmare. In this nightmare he sees himself lying on a bench, naked, with his own mother. The poet's vision had lighted the heaven full of stars; now he walks through swamps with ugly, misshapen stars reflected in the muddy waters.

The tragic irony of the situation is that Ignas, the poet, should have understood that this catastrophic evening in the orchard was really an affirmation of man's basic humanity against the murderous spirit of law wearing the mask of sainthood. His mother, after all, had but two alternatives: be human or turn into an impossible idol of purity, bound tightly in the straight jacket of false holiness. As for the priest, he, too, is but a man who, if he were to obey the iron dictates of his calling, would betray humanity in himself as did that other priest, Antanas, when he forbade his sister to leave the monastery.

The defeat of Ignas goes even deeper — perhaps he could understand this, but refused to from an animal fear that his own incestuous desire for his mother would then stand revealed in all its ugly nakedness. In any case, Ignas, like the whole world around him is left in ruins after the first world war. Then the wheel of time turns; the second global catastrophe comes — it is war again. Ignas is now in love with a beautiful girl, Inga (the symbolic nature of the protagonists is already evident in their names: Ignas and Inga; like Caius and Caia in ecclesiastical terminology, signifying lovers in general). He still does not know how to be human, because Inga, for him, is again a figure of sainthood — Saint Inga — and she remains unapproachable, a living symbol of the impossibility of happiness. Life itself, as if in cruel and ironic pity, makes Inga literally unreachable for him — she dies in a train wreck. Ignas wanders through the ruins of the war, looking for her grave in cemeteries, where the green frogs of hope are jumping about in vain. His longing grows and takes him Beyond — to the metaphysical dimension, where there is a train, and Inga, waiting for him and dying forever. Ignas comes to her but he cannot free her from death because he is still alive, and the love of the living is a temporary thing; it weakens with time and loses the power of resurrection.

Thus, the image of the poet in Škėma's works always emerges from the tension between love and death. Death and love appear in many guises, evoke a multitude of emotions, ideas, actions, create and destroy many profound answers to the riddles of the universe. Škėma demonstrates this with special dramatic clarity in his plays, where his man-poet, burdened with a multitude of complex and contradictory private emotions is confronted with an enormous and tragic reality requiring radical action and fatal decisions. In **The Awakening**, the extreme situation of the torture room in Soviet prison forces the actors to destroy each other and themselves, almost like in some nightmarish dance, where Kazys, Pijus and Elena go round and round, holding hands with love and death.

In another play, **The Candlestick** (**Žvakidė**, 1957), we have similar complex and tortured poetic personalities trying to work out their destinies and fulfill their private desires while the reality of the given moment is chashing down over their heads like a giant wave about to engulf them all.

The scene is Lithuania in 1941, in the last few days of the first Soviet occupation, just before the German attack. The last Lithuanian victims of Communism are going to their deaths, often betrayed by their own people. One such traitor is Kostas, a bitter and complex figure. As a child he yearned for music and love but was rejected by his family, and his love turned to hatred, or, rather, put on the mask of hatred without ceasing to be love, in a perverted way. Similarly, his music rises up like a fierce dark stream entering and distorting the Bach toccatas he plays on the organ of an abandoned church. The church is empty because Kostas had betrayed its parson, his father's brother, to death.

Kostas has a brother, Antanas, who, like Abel in the Bible, represents the figure of light. Noble and humble, radiant with love, he nevertheless remains, as it were, guilty of the fact that their parents loved him and not Kostas. As the German advance turns the sky blood red, Kostas, tortured by the growing awareness that he became what he is out of jealousy,

decides to cut through his confusing inner conflicts by taking a resolute step toward damnation: he kills his brother with a huge candlestick before the altar in the church. The Cain and Abel theme thus introduced removes the conflict from the context of a specific time and place and makes it a recurring theme from the very beginnings of human history, translated again by Škėma into the framework of love and death. Kostas brings death to Antanas (and himself) in revenge for the love he was refused in childhood. Antanas, through his love and trust, achieves his fulfillment, which is death.

In the two plays discussed above, there is a determined effort by Škėma to discern the principles of good and evil through the tangled web of contradictions, ironies and fears in the shadow of catastrophe. In the next effect, **A Christmas Play** (*Kalėdų vaizdelis*, 1961), Škėma seems at first to give up this effort altogether. We can no longer point our finger to the supposed villains and heroes. All are only sufferers and through their sins, like through a glass darkly, they search for self-fulfillment, half-blinded with alcohol, fear and pain. The whore Magdalena, for instance, has always wanted to be a dajicer and to strew flowers under the feet of priests in processions. Now she sleeps with many men, but: "even so, every time I was in bed with a man, I imagined that I was dancing, dancing very beautifully and elegantly." Panašus (his name translates as "he who resembles," i. e. Christ, although he is, perhaps, a madman and an impostor) kisses her gently on her maidenly lips as one would an innocent. Two other people, Skaidra and Danguolė, his wife, seem to be in an irrevocable conflict, but from their mutual heartrending explanations the reader understands that the issue is not hatred or guilt, but simply suffering — they have been so created that they cannot help hurting each other. Panašus invites them both to join his feast of joy, to taste water turned into wine.

The way Panašus-Chris gathers everyone in to the shelter of his love creates a feeling that **A Christmas Play**, far from being a story of crime or punishment, is an apotheosis of universal forgiveness or, possibly, of universal agony in the name of One who has given meaning to all human suffering through his own Calvary. This feeling is present in the dialogues, in the quarrels — everything is permeated with the expectation of some great love which would embrace everyone, sorrows, sins, revolting vulgarity and all. What we see is the face of humanity covered with dirt, sores and puss — a face waiting to be kissed by the Redeemer. Quite logically, therefore, the action is set on Christmas Eve. This is the time of expectation. Ironically, also, the place is a mental hospital, described in such a way as to suggest that the whole world might really be nothing but a madhouse, waiting insanely for something that never did happen and never could.

The character of Skaidra in **A Christmas Play** in essence absorbs, supercedes and transfigures the characters of Pijus and Kostas in the two previous plays. As if he felt himself to be the actor called upon to portray the greatest human sin, he raises his hand not against other people but directly against Panašus - Christ. And Panašus tells him quite clearly that this is his task: "Do your work, Skaidra," he says, almost as if this were the eleventh commandment of God. Because of this, the role of Skaidra - Judas acquires a special kind of nobility. His task is terrifying, but since it must be done, we are almost thankful to Skaidra for having taken upon himself this sin. We all murder God in many ways in our hearts, but it is Skaidra who actually performs the deed. In this way he paradoxically begins to resemble Christ, because His cross, too, is made of all our sins. If we were now to assume that Judas represents the principle of death, and Christ of love, we can see how, in a final paradox, their roles in the fate of mankind blend into one: death and love are one, forever together in an eternal waiting, like the everlasting moment of dying in **Saint Inga** — the most unbearable and the most significant reality.

We have said before that Škėma's heroes seem to challenge the world in an effort of love. The world responds to this effort by obliterating the challenger altogether in the end, but the first step toward destruction is to make man realize that he is not wanted on earth. The whole world is ruled by logical inevitabilities which, in their dead clarity, are entirely incomprehensible to the living imagination. The blind laws of the universe do not admit the possibility of its poetic transfiguration, and for this reason the universe remains unreal for Škėma's man-poet — he is doomed to be stranger, an exile.

Such understanding of the fact of exile separates Škėma rather sharply from some other Lithuanian writers for whom exile is merely physical: the loss of the homeland, of its meadows, brooks, native villages and of people dear to them. In Škėma's works exile is a general human condition insofar as "human" specifically means imagination, creativity and a yearning for immortality in an organic fusion with the very sources of being. A man is an exile because his spark of divinity alienates him from the earth — his mother. The only way back to the native soil is over the threshold of death.

This deep-seated conflict between the imperative need to belong to the world (or, rather, with the world to ultimate reality: Škėma has stated once that: • "both worlds are unreal, the actual and the one created by me; in a real world they would blend into one") and the unavoidable necessity of remaining a stranger is reflected in all facets of Škėma's fiction, first of all, perhaps, in his style. We find tender, warm descriptions of man's response to life in himself and around him, descriptions that seem to weave together man's own consciousness and the throbbing vitality of nature into a rich and colorful tapestry of being. In contrast, we also find bitterly ironical statements, juxtapositions of highest exultation and lowliest animal needs, as if Škėma, burdened by the foreknowledge of his heroes' doom, wanted to expose the cruel mockery of their situation in a kind of tortured revenge for the indignity inherent in man's bondage to nature's laws. A typical example would be the picture of a man with diarrhea, sitting in the outhouse and contemplating the blueness of the sky through a heart-shaped hole in the door. Torn between such contrasts, the narrative often resembles a confused mosaic made up of accidental sights and inner visions, of masks and living faces, of past and present, and of distant places continuing the landscape directly before one's eyes. It does seem to represent a recognizable picture even on the surface, but its real meaning lies

in the symbolic relationship of one piece of mosaic to another. Here is a picture of a man walking down Broadway from a collection of sketches entitled **Čelesta** (1960):

Golgotha is the falling of a burning airplane into the abyss, the cry of a four-year-old over mother's corpse, the steps of a pregnant girl, the agony of a man under interrogation in a jail cell, the silence of the paralyzed in bed. A little song about love lost is quivering on Broadway, there are many beggars on Broadway, the sailors are squeezing the girls' hands, my cross is higher than the highest skyscraper; it is an advertisement for a fragrant soap.⁶

A walk on Broadway thus becomes the road to Calvary, and every fact of existence contributes to the final agony of the Crucifixion.

Škėma's longest work, the novel **The White Shroud** is concerned with the same issues that exist in his other works. The main hero, Antanas Garšva, is again a poet, trying to create, to feel life as profoundly as he can. The deeper his feeling, the greater the suffering. While still in high school, Garšva had already learned the precepts of Schopenhauer: "optimism is a bitter mockery of human sorrow; life is evil because life is struggle; the more perfect an organism, the more perfect is its suffering." The novel is full of life, but it begins with Garšva's attempt at suicide and ends with his becoming insane.

From one point of view it could be said that the novel is mainly about the defeat of the poet. Garšva possesses the two essential poetic gifts: the ability to have a completely original, profoundly personal view of life, and the ability to describe what he sees. The task of the poet, for him, is to accomplish a miracle — to speak such language that from his words, like from the touch of divine hand, the blind would see and darkness would change into a world rich with color and form. But Garšva does not succeed, and the hand of darkness closes his own eyes. The causes of his defeat are several, none of them accidental, all connected intimately with the innate qualities of the poet. Thus, in a way, his being a poet is also his own undoing: with the same gesture with which he challenged the powers of darkness he delivers a mortal blow to himself.

First of all, a poet is in a way a distortion of the laws of nature: by conceiving a special dimension of being, he breaks the general course of life; for this reason he is a miracle and a monstrosity at the same time. At the very beginning of the novel we can see that Garšva knows it:

Many geniuses were sick. Be glad you're neurotic. The book was written by Louis E. Bisch, M.D., Ph.D. Two doctors in one. The double Louis E. Bisch affirms: Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, Michelangelo, Pascal, Pope, Poe, O'Henry, Walt Whitman, Moliere, Stevenson — were all neurotics. It is a convincing list. At the end: Dr. L. E. Bisch and Antanas Garšva.⁷

Garšva is sick, and his illness is inherited -from his mother. His mother liked fairy tales about handsome princes and knights dying in battle. The fairy tales were sad, the mother's hair was black; she was beautiful and she wore clothes of black satin. She carried in herself the seed of mental aberration which rose to the surface because of her husband's vulgar jealousy. Under emotional stress she wasted away, became insane, turned into an ugly monster. Thus, the gift of poetry becomes intimately connected with the heritage of madness.

Secondly, every word of the poet crashes against the wall of reality and, because this wall is much stronger, it is the poet who gets crushed, and not reality. In the case of Garšva, this happened during the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania. By this time, Garšva had advanced his poetic development to the point where he was able to grasp the genuine ancient spirit of poetry in Lithuanian folklore and songs. He understood that the old Lithuanian songs were based on play with words, on groups of sounds with purely musical and emotional, but non-verbal meanings, stemming from the slow and continuous blending of man with nature. As for the contemporary romantic notions about the Lithuanian national character, manifest in the work of poets who wanted to write "like the people," Garšva had his to say:

He remembered the old Lithuanian harmonies his father used to sing, true in their lyrical atonality. Then came the serfdom, and later, the liberated slaves could do no better than to imitate their former masters: to harmonize the songs, to transport to the North the creaky old Mount Olympus. Perkūnas, Pykuolis, Patrimpas, the high priests, the vestal virgins — all these were but imported Southern gods and their servants, now hastily putting on Lithuanian costumes.⁸

And here is the true national spirit, as it seemed to Garšva:

Lole palo eglelo,
Lepo leputėli

sang the nightingale. All that was needed was to stand in the forest and to watch the snakes hugging the ground with their long bodies, see the toads observing the universe with their concave eyes. One had to meditate without cogitation. Words were nothing but magic formulas. Incomprehensible and significant, like the formation of fog. ... Honeycombs, sheaves of grain, ruses, tulips and lilies. Lazy and sweets-loving bears. The sap of pine trees — golden amber. The foam of the Baltic Sea, sucked in slowly by the amber sand.⁹

Ancient Balt, musical Balt, show me the tree to which you prayed. Does it command? No. Does it comfort? Yes. Look at the smoke rising into the sky, at the will-o'-the-wisp, at the bird in flight. You may.¹⁰

The bolsheviks did not understand this and told Garšva to write a truly "proletarian" poem, presumably one that would meet the demands of "socialist realism." Garšva could not force himself to do it and was so severely beaten by the secret police that his innate tendency toward mental disorders turned into a steadily growing, irrepressible threat of madness. Ironically, the hand that beat Garšva belonged to a true Lithuanian of the ancient cast, a village lad who was personally rather fond of the "unacceptable poems" by Garšva.

The third defeat of the poet is due to the fact that he always sacrifices too much to poetry. Religion and poetry have at least this much in common that they demand from the elect their full devotion, a renunciation not only of the world but also of themselves. Generally speaking, love may be said to increase the measure of perfection in man, to deepen his capacity for feeling, to bring him nearer, as it were, to the poetic consciousness. But to a poet, love is a hindrance — it provides a shelter, a home, protection from reality, whereas a poet should always remain vulnerable to it, since poetry is pain. Garšva meets Elena and falls in love, and then deliberately renounces his love, cuts the thread of human ties and remains alone. This refusal then destroys his heart. Reality has laws, among which is the organic and irresistible urge to love and be loved. Refused, it turns into still another fury driving Garšva into madness. Nevertheless, the very process by which a poet is defeated in this life brings a rich treasure of new thoughts, new experiences, new understanding. And this is the meaning of the creative life. In his defeat Garšva remains victorious for our sake, just like Kazys and Elena were victorious in **The Awakening**.

After all the human agony revealed by Škëma, the lasting effect of his work is one of a mysterious elevation of the soul, as if one had received a priceless, though painful, gift. We might return to the ideas of Schopenhauer which Garšva pondered so carefully: the more perfect an organism, the more perfect the suffering. An exquisitely poetic depiction of such suffering we find in the cycle called "Apocalyptic variations" in **Saint Inga**. The motto for this cycle is from the Book of Revelation, 21, 18-21: "And the building of the wall it was of jasper: and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst." Such is the kingdom of heaven. As for the earth, one episode in the "Variations" describes a collision between a trolley and a truck carrying gasoline in Chicago. This is how the people on the trolley perish:

A great fire stabs through the walls of the trolley. It is too late to jump out. Pure gold splashes on the hair of the boy, and the hair bursts into emerald. The mother grasps her son's head, sapphire and chalcedony, and chrysolite and sardonyx tear her stomach to pieces. Fists beat against the windows, the glass shatters in sardius and beryl. Jasper, topaz and chrysoprasus Shoot forth from between the twisted fingers. Then comes the darkness because fire licks out the eyes and the people can no longer see jacinth and amethyst."¹¹

Perfect suffering is pain beyond enduring, made from the same rare jewels that went into the making of the Kingdom of Heaven. This may well be the essence of Skëma's perception of the world. When spiritualized, this suffering is the goal toward which man strives in Skëma's works. This is why death is needed, for it is the ecstasy which raises man to his highest degree of perfection.

Notes:

1 Antanas Škëma, *Balta drobulė* (London: Nida, 1958), pp. 190-1

2 Antanas Škëma, *Pabudimas* (Chicago: Terra, 1956), p. 27

3 Antanas Škëma, *Šventoji Inga* (Chicago: Terra, 1956), p. 57.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

6 Antanas Škëma, *Čelesta* (London: Nida, 1960), p. 60

7 *Balta drobulė*, pp. 7 - 8.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 80 -1.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 81 - 2.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

11 *Šventoji Inga*, p. 125.