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FAITH IN EXILE

The Descomposition and Reconstitution of God in the Poetry of Algimantas Mackus

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Adaptation of a chapter from *Nužemintųjų generacija*, a forthcoming book on the responses to the alienations of exile by the younger Lithuanian poets. Algimantas Mackus, born in 1932 in Lithuania and killed in an automobile accident in 1964 in Chicago, was the most compelling poetic spokesman of his generation.

Exile is the death of faith. More precisely, it is one of the forms of death against which man has to fight, proudly and hopelessly, with the insufficient resources of his being.

Exile is not a unique, self-contained experience of loss of one's historical home. It is an inner process, growing in depth as time goes on. And the more profound the exile from history, the more one becomes conscious of one's homelessness in the very structure of existence itself.

The changing experience of faith in exile is reflected in the evolution of the concept of God in the poetry of Algimantas Mackus. Between sixteen and seventeen, Mackus still related to God with a flat, poster-like confidence:

Who shall return the exile to his native river,
the homeless Lithuanian to his snow-covered land? —
There's none but Thou, Great Ruler of the earth and heavens,
Who art in every snowflake falling home.¹

But the meaning of exile reveals itself only when, in a sudden hurricane of despair, posters are ripped apart. In the neighborhood of his twenty-fifth year, Mackus remains linked to God only by suffering.

Wilt Thou return as a guest from continents far away,
Wilt Thou accept from me a sign as last remembrance? —
A thorn that Thou hast left here from your crown?
Then we shall part like two good friends,
never to meet again on this sad earth.²

Shared suffering, one keeps discovering, constitutes a more profound bond than shared faith. Insofar as he still felt a bond of suffering with the human God, Mackus, in this phase of his development, could be regarded as a Christian mystic deprived of his faith. He might also be compared with some of the contemporary "death of God" theologians.

There were still, ambiguously, fragments of the soul that belonged to Christ, now no longer capable of salvation. Christ has retained his proximity to man because his humanity had not excluded anyone from the circle of love and respect — and, above all, because he had suffered conscientiously. Hence it is still possible to internalize an image of Christ. Precisely because he no longer has the power of salvation, he can become an integral part of an unsaved existence:

When, weary after resurrection,
Christ, you shall seek rest again,

convenient coffin I will be for you.³

But, in his contemporary impoverishment, man has too little to give anything of himself to the God who has become a structural principle of His civilization, but no longer participates intimately in human affairs. God, immobilized by His storied omnipotence, delayed by the professional proof-readers of His perfection, was late for his appointment with the contemporary man, and He was left waiting alone.

Why did You tell me not I'll have your blessing?
The lonely mission chapel that I am, awaiting God?
I would have suffered thirst,
I would'nt have drunk (the poisoned)
the only water.

--- --- --- --- --- --- --- --- ---

The earth has conquered me.⁴

Historically and psychologically, man was first alienated from God by the emergence of the autonomy of his body:

blood will not... join us
for our veins are closed tight⁵

and the increasingly evident exhaustion of traditional faith:

Approach, though I'm not waiting.
I'm only tired. The waiting wore me out.⁶

But ultimately, in the pain center of a contemporary consciousness, God is perceived as the Absolute Stranger (indeed, as the last remaining stranger): God is death.

For Kazys Bradūnas, the pagan Catholic, the God of nature could still be the dispenser of the good life, the primeval nourisher of the vitality of the peasant.⁷ To Algimantas Mackus, the post-Christian mystic, God revealed Himself only in the exquisitely perfected finality of death.

God opened a spring in the cold shadow of the earth
and stretched the shadow of the earth to me
and covered me with it, by it prepared me for death.⁸

— John, foreigner John,
there is no tombstone — no resurrection.

— Lord, oh Lord, it was You who nailed the coffin tight.⁹

God is a stranger because (in exile more sharply than in the givenness of one's inherited home) death has become the sole unambiguous feature of his face. God who has survived in the necessity which compels. The earlier God, the one of the Agricultural Revolution, who, we are told, was once capable of human love, has dissipated His warmth. His blood has congealed in the stained-glass windows of His civilization; He is no longer met in life. One can only seek Him "in an ironic dream". He has become an aesthetic vision:

Was it not beautiful, the hand of God
stroking the angel's hair
was not the face of God beautiful
when it thrust a glass eye into yours ¹⁰

The eye of glass — the organ whereby the naive soul would gaze at the immediacy of God — is merely a mirror that reflects the structure of the universe, of utmost indifference to man, hence absurd. The freezing up of the organ of faith paralyzes the soul.

The traditional concept of God, in psychoanalytic terms, undergoes decomposition into its basic elements of love and necessity. For Antanas Škėma, the older, and in this respect more conservative Lithuanian heretic, the God of love was still preserved as a part of his heritage. Only He could no longer be reached in the sobriety of a sane mind. But for Algimantas Mackus, the naturalized citizen of the secular city, this God had completely ceased to exist. For him, only the God of necessity remained tangible, and He gave proof of his existence by His power of destroying that which alone has significance for man.

Since the God of love has departed without recall from human existence, there is, of course, no hope of salvation. To him who prepares "in the shadow of wreaths / to conceive immortality", in a poem on the funeral of Antanas Škėma, Mackus

writes:

I did not speak the message of blood —
you are dead, and dead you will remain.
The body's broken torso
--- --- --- has not knowledged.¹¹

It is unknown who, or what, might have acknowledged the man of many masks and a fragmented body, finally unburdened of his sensuousness. The space left in the place of God is a nameless universe.

The last, posthumously published book of Algimantas Mackus concludes with an anti-phrase of Dylan Thomas:

And death's dominion Shall remain.¹²

In his realistic nightmares, crowded with effigies of the perversity of angels, Algimantas Mackus had seen the God of necessity denuded of His decorative parade-ground uniform. The poet's response was a manly refusal to accept the promised contentment of death, God's only gift to his kind of man:

on copper plate — intaglio —
the furious God, inmidst of ritual,
recalls salvation thrown out to the crowds.
Circular like water, briny like the salt,
I shall return to God the season of death.¹³

With the God of tradition left in inhuman isolation, man faces the tension between the psychological necessity and the moral impossibility of faith.

(Do not dead children
need faith, angel?
do not dead children
need fairy tales?)¹⁴

The man of a paralyzed soul, our contemporary, needs illusions. But of illusions none have survived the Exile. Our consciousness conceives itself in the experience of our loss.

In Algimantas Mackus' last book, the intellectual tension between the impossibility and the necessity of faith appears to have been, by a powerful poetic effort, resolved. Next to the "furious God," the ruler of necessity, another God makes his appearance. He is immediately rejected by all the experts of faith. But what do the experts of faith — particularly in the tradition-frosted Lithuanian universe¹⁵ — know about God? Only the rejected God, who has not been appropriated by anyone, who has not succumbed to exploitation by institutions and organized movements, the God of the heretics, can bring whatever salvation is still conceivable.

Seven o'clock sharp
in private audience
the Pope received God.
— — — — —
the representatives of faiths
with trumpets and trombones proclaimed —
there is no God! —
then congratulated the Pontiff.
— — — — —
Seven o'clock sharp
the Pope recalled God,
— — — — —
and seven o'clock sharp
— — — — —
the God that was recalled proclaimed
the resurrection of Garcia Lorca.¹⁶

Only the God who has never disgraced himself by accepting the "crown of a monarch" is not alienated from the contemporary man. Alienation could not take hold of the God of the heretics, because he has no existence outside of human commitments. And of their commitments even despairing realists cannot, by the God of necessity, be deprived.

But the God of the heretics is to be encountered only in the conscience of men. The bureaucracy of the universe is at the disposal of the God of necessity. This is why the universe is, from a human point of view, absurd. Mackus fears that the

inhuman absurdity of the universe will not terminate even with death. The metaphysical insult of death has an eternity to run its predetermined course.

Theresa in her grave
has grown up a big girl now

— — — — —
the angel in the stained-glass window in the mornings
having heard out the prayers foreseen
and foredoomed
runs up with gooseberries and pears
or apples in his basket
your Father will soon send you
a dress more spacious
just you wear out the apples dear Theresa
wear out the baskets of the gooseberries and pears¹⁷

But why must the metaphysical insult to man continue even after his death? —

all gods are, angel, thin and angry, envious of the earth,
because of earth the heavens, angel, have been simplified
and joy castrated,
angel, because of the earth
in Theresa's basket blossoms
the coarse gooseberry bush.¹⁸

This earth, clearly, is not the natural earth, the land which homeless exiles have been, quite unambiguously, deprived of. It is a symbolic earth, the only significant universe of which even exiles cannot be expropriated — the humanity that is in man himself. It is because of the primacy of man's loyalty to man — to a person who will die—that the God of necessity, the Aztec monster, has devoured the heart of joy of human existence.

Is it possible to be happy if you know that you will live to remember, as long as you live, the death of others who have given strength, warmth, and significance to your own existence, in whose existence you are rooted? "The Lord" accepts the friendship of John, "the good preacher", only when the latter wips the "soul of (his) ancestor" — that is, comes to terms with fate, forgetting that what man means to man is more important than the irreversible commands of necessity, the pronouncements of a divinity, the laws of historical development. Mackus refused the whip of the believer. He chose faithfulness.

Our only heritage is the uncertainty of all things. Our only possession is our faithfulness to those fragments of the existence of others which have cut through our skin of indifference. To preserve in oneself, decaying not, the architecture of faithfulness is the ultimate requirement of the religion of the exiled, the reconstitution of God.

It is no longer the completed perfection of any philosophy of eternity, but the living imperfectness of concrete reality — of human beings who, because they lack so much, need what we can offer — that appeals to the capacity for fidelity of twentieth-century men.

Strangely, however, though Algimantas Mackus rebelled against the God of necessity, he remained needful of a judging God — an exalted form of necessity. The poet of exile had inherited the injuries of Jurek, the brown-eyed boy shot down as he was riding his toy horse in the ancient ghetto of Vilnius,¹⁹ and of the peasant deportees to Siberia shouting hoarsely for air, water and bread in their sealed box cars, and of the black African, the good preacher John, forced by the Lord to betray the spirits of his ancestors. He could not bear to see injustice unjudged.

Things too, shall, be called
to the halls of Last Judgment.²⁰

In a conversation, I once suggested that in this context "things" might stand for "faiths". Though Mackus seemed to find this interpretation unexpected, he did not disagree. It would seem then that he could not let the God of necessity go because he needed to have someone, in an impenetrable corner of the universe, to judge all the faiths. And with faiths commit no crime only those who have no faith, — to paraphrase another two lines from the same poem.

A self-correcting court of history did not suffice for Algimantas Mackus. Citizen of a small nation (a sister nation of which, the Old Prussians, had been obliterated by another faith-bringing aggressor), Mackus did not believe that history can be made to correct its injuries. This lack of faith in the justice of history forced him to remain open to the possibility of metaphysics. But for exiles — all kinds of them, domestic and international — it is easier to perceive the contours of Aztec than of Franciscan deities.

The poetry of Algimantas Mackus shrieks with religious urgency. But the mythological figures that took shape in the course of the Agricultural Revolution, ten millennia ago, can no longer be liberated from the stones of their churches. God, the life-sustaining impulse, is in bondage bound to his own machinery. The idol has decomposed into threatening necessity and love in the stained-glass window. And a contemporary who has searched for faith in the alienation of exile had to spend the few years of his maturity in a depression of

Eternal mourning
Before eternal God.²¹

Notes

- 1 Algimantas Pagėgis (pseudonym), *Elegijos* (Chicago: Sūduva, 1950), p. 13. The translations are by Rimvydas Šilbajoris.
- 2 Algimantas Mackus, *Jo yra žemė* (Chicago: Santara, 1959), p. 51.
- 3 Algimantas Mackus, *Neornamentuotos kalbos generacija ir Augintiniai* (Chicago: Santara, 1962), p. 17.
- 4 Mackus, *Jo yra žemė*, pp. 53, 49.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 49
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 41
- 7 Kazys Bradūnas, an older poet of impeccable Catholic orthodoxy, has responded to the rootlessness of exile by seeking to re-experience the primeval intimacy with nature of the ancient Lithuanians and, with this purpose in mind, has rather successfully exploited various elements of pagan imagery.
- 8 Mackus, *Jo yra žemė*, p. 52.
- 9 Mackus, *Neornamentuotos kalbos generacija*, p. 63.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 11 Algimantas Mackus, *Chapel B* (Chicago: Algimanto Mackaus Vardo Knygų Leidimo Fondas, 1965), n. 54.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 61
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 23
- 14 Mackus, *Neornamentuotos kalbos generacija*, p. 25.
- 15 Among Lithuanians dispersed throughout the world since the final occupation of their country by Soviet forces in 1945, no religiously identified intellectual has ever delivered himself of a single scandalous idea; and no Lithuanian professor, with one Parisian exception, has yet fulfilled Nietzsche's desire to see a professor dance.
- 16 Mackus, *Chapel B*, pp. 46-48.
- 17 Mackus, *Neornamentuotos kalbos generacija*, p. 22.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 23
- 19 It is characteristic of the universal humanism of Mackus that he, a victim of Great Russian colonialist appetites, chose as the central symbol of his protest against inhumanity a "stranger", little Jewish boy martyred by the Nazis, the aggressor whom he himself had not been directly injured by. I would wish the moral sense of the younger Lithuanian liberals to stand represented by the song of Jurek, — a poem of far greater poetic force than Evtushenko's Babi Yar.
- 20 Mackus, *Neornamentuotos kalbos generacija*, p. 67.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 10