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Editors of this issue: Antanas Klimas, Ignas K. Skrupskelis

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NEW TRENDS IN THE SOVIET LITHUANIAN NOVEL

ALGIRDAS ANTANAITIS

The thaw that the arts of the Soviet Union felt after Stalin's death reached the poetry of Soviet Lithuania almost immediately, however, the prose was not affected until several years later. This is understandable, because not only the prosaic genres, being more concrete, lack the flexibility of poetry, not only they require more clarity of expression, and by the same token more courage on the part of the writer, but also in general they simply take more time to create.

Perhaps the most important change in the fiction that emerged after the thaw was the disregard for the so called "no conflict theory", which had made impossible the conflict between good and evil, since presumably there was no evil in the great socialistic society. The conflict could exist only between good and better. Furthermore, a person acquired some rights in his relationship with the society, no matter how perfect this society might have been in the socialistic establishment. Even less desirable characteristics or traits of an individual became more tolerable, since they were gradually recognized as a part of his personality. Such a climate apparently was adequate even for the emergence of a more serious psychological novel, impossible under the strict and unbending rules of the socialistic realism. Even very first novels significantly affected by the thaw, such as "Studentai" (The Students) by Vytautas Rimkevičius or "Pušis, kuri juokėsi" (The Pinetree that Laughed) by Justinas Marcinkevičius, published in 1957 and 1961 respectively contained serious attempts to view a person from more than one side.

During the period of the last three years, two books were discussed more by all of the literary critics of Soviet Lithuania, than any literary works before. These were two novels: "Kauno romanas" by Alfonsas Bieliauskas (the literally translation of the title could mean "The Novel of Kaunas" as well as "The Romance of Kaunas," since the Lithuanian word for novel — *romanas* — is also used to mean 'the romance'), and "Adomo obuolys" (or "the Adam's Apple") by Mykolas Sluckis. Both of these novels also enjoyed a tremendous popularity, were published in two editions some 25,000 copies each, also translated into several languages (I believe into the Latvian and Estonian among them); their adaptations for the presentations on the stage and screen are now being prepared.

The story of "Kauno romanas" is quite simple. Comrade Selis, fairly high official in an employment trust, although not a member of the party, arrives to the city of Kaunas to solve a case between a female factory worker and her boss, a sort of romance, that received an adverse publicity in the newspapers thereby intimidating the higher authorities. Actually his goal (and also the order of his superior) is just to get her signature denying the uncalled for publicity. Selis' trip occurs in the wake of the sudden death of his only child daughter, which left him in quite a shock. Now, meeting his old friends and acquaintances returns him into his past, forces to analyze it in the light of new developments around him as well as his own maturity. After the subject worker declines to give him the desired signature, he realizes that the justice is actually on her side and decides, probably for the first time in his life to stand up against the orders of his superior regardless of consequences. That should constitute his first step in the right direction, his refusal to swim with the current, which he had always done before, even if against his own convictions.

The story of "Adomo obuolys" is even less complicated. It consists of a chain of events in a day of a young well educated couple, married for ten years, that almost leads to the destruction of their marriage. It also involves various relationships between generations, family members, ruling officials and their subordinates.

In both novels the main characters have numerous occasions to reveal their pasts in which they see themselves not exactly in the light they would prefer to see. Also in their associates, friends or superiors they discover all sorts of traits not seen as objectively before, which do not amount to anything to be proud of. What is more important, they are forced to admit, that the era or "personality cult" in itself could not alone be blamed for everything that seems undesirable today. The bulk of the blame falls upon them as active supporters if not creators of that era.

Even though such disclosures were by no means ordinary in Soviet Lithuanian literature, even though they required plenty of courage on the part of the writers, the focus of attention of almost all critics fell mainly upon the new literary form in which both of these novels were presented. The form known as "the stream of consciousness," in the literature of the Western world, now more commonly called "the inner monologue" by the Soviet Lithuanian critics. A form, which permits to open the intimate world of the characters, to portray their inner self, their thoughts and expectations with less risk of these characters being identified as the writer himself. In a way such a form provided the means to loosen the chains of socialistic realism. To some more optimistic critics that also meant closer ties or even some spiritual relationship with the literatures of the Western World. In their articles many critics found analogies between the two novels and the works of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, William Faulkner or even Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. The comparison was seldom called for, frequently inaccurate, and at the end both authors denied even being familiar with the proposed protagonists, however, on the whole these discussions were useful to the critics as well as to the readers, since many names and works unfamiliar or even unheard of before were brought out into the open. Consequently these two novels contributed largely to the renaissance of the art of criticism in the Soviet Lithuanian literature, which heretofore served basically as a maiden for the party as interpreter of its dogmas.

While the main characters as a result of the new form were more fully exposed, and acquired many shades of gray, to the point, that the critics, unaccustomed to such portrayals mistook them for "antiheroes," the secondary characters, especially those identified with the regime of independent Lithuania, received the old onesided, largely negative, treatment. The persons expected not to sympathize with the regime were portrayed exclusively in extremely dark colors, while the active members of the anti-Soviet resistance movement, the guerillas were written off as "bandits." On the other hand, the characters associated with the party always received a careful white glove treatment.. .

Careful were the critics, especially those with more insight or with a deeper knowledge of contemporary Western literatures. Vytautas Kubilius, perhaps the most prominent of them in his lengthy analysis of "inner monologue" in the Lithuanian literature expressed his obvious scepticism:

"The inner crisis in the novels of A. Bieliauskas and M. Sluckis are enclosed within, are bound by the frames of historical time, and unable to jump out of them. The temporary inadequacies of the ruling system, the passing evils of a certain era are the main objects of doubts and devaluations and hopes presented by the characters of these novels. The common human aspects of our being so clearly underlined in our contemporary poetry are non-existent here."

No less sceptical was a young writer Leonidas Jacinevičius:

"The new form of inner monologue clearly raises the problem of the movements within the inner world of the author himself, because the spiritual resources of a character, no matter how shrewdly constructed, will not be greater than those of his creator."

However even in their doubts the critics remained optimistic, if for no other reason than the fact, that the Lithuanian prose, always accustomed to play a second fiddle to the poetry finally could stand up and be recognized. Furthermore both writers were successful in maintaining their own creative individualities, they were different in their expressions and the new style or form fitted each one of them quite naturally.

The exclusive attention focused upon them also had some negative effects, one of them being the fact, that other good or even excellent literary works, especially some contributions of the young and less recognized authors published during that period remained in the shadows almost unnoticed. Some of them, even though not as attracting in their exotic form were nevertheless truly authentic creations, demonstrations of rare and genuine talent. Probably the most outstanding short novel of that period was "Senojo miesto amžius" ("The Age of an Old Town") by a young (b. 1934) author Raimondas Kašauskas, who previously had just two small collections of short stories to his credit.

What is so peculiar, so different or important about "the old town"? Nothing much. In fact, as it is stated in the book "nothing would change in the world, if the town did not exist, if an atomic bomb would drop and blow it off the surface of the earth." Here, as any place else people are born, they grow up fighting for their existence, striving for happiness, loving, creating families, trying to find closer ties between themselves, trying to leave their footprints on the earth after they are gone, so that their lives would not vanish without any trace. Nevertheless they disappear seldom noticed, missed or appreciated even by the closest and dearest to them. The life of Adomas Končius is a typical illustration of many lives under the roofs of the old town. Throughout the best years of his life spent in a local textile factory Adam's goal was to build a more comfortable nest for himself and his family. After building such a nest brick by brick with his own hands Adam realizes, that there is very little time left to enjoy it. His wife Terese leaves him after a long and painful struggle with cancer. His older son Leonas, an important young scientist, returns to his home only as a guest for short and infrequent visits. The younger son Donatas, mother's favorite, an engineer in the same textile factory is even more estranged spiritually in spite of his living under the same roof. Furthermore, when Donatas is arrested for the conspiracy in stealing goods from his plant Adam finds out, that he and his wife actually always waited for his death in order to inherit the new home for themselves. Finally, after having completed her secondary school Adam's youngest daughter Rasa also leaves home to go to college in a nearby city, and the old man remains alone in a new house of an old town. A lonely old man in an empty house...

To state, that the author of the "The Age of the Old Town" is not influenced by the literary movements affecting the form of contemporary Soviet Lithuanian novel would be incorrect. He is especially successful in his use of "inner dialog" in which

Adam constantly addresses his wife, his brother Felix, his daughter or his friend. These "inner dialogs" very effectively reveal Adam's attitudes, relationships and his moods, his inner self, his true personality. It is remarkable, that Kašauskas does not allow his main character, who is also the narrator of the story to take the advantage of his position and build himself as a true hero at the expense of other characters. Adam is never reluctant to recognize his faults or shortcomings, while seldom being onesided or quick in the judgement of the actions of other characters. In fact the most outstanding virtue of this novel is its humane attitude toward all characters, a conscientious effort to avoid classification of them into red and blue, black and white, strictly negative or positive. The author, through his narrator, treats them all as human beings, deserving an objective insight and forgiveness for their sins or failures. Even some small passages touching upon the active post-war anti-Soviet resistance, massive deportations of people to Siberia or encounters with religion reflect the author's compassion for humanity. In this respect R. Kašauskas novel is still unique in the contemporary Soviet Lithuanian prose.

The choice of an elderly person as a narrator most likely was not an accidental one, but done with a purpose to diminish the temptations of the critics strictly following the directions "from above" to identify his viewpoints with those of the author himself, and, by the same token to allow the author more freedom of expression. As a result this novel does not contain the usual denunciations of the regime of the independent Lithuania or excessive praises of the new socialistic order. In fact it *does* jump out of the frames of historical time and touches *significantly* upon "the common human aspects of our being." And this is undoubtedly more important than the mere changes in form.