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THE ASSERTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY VIA MYTH AND FOLKLORE IN SOVIET LITHUANIAN LITERATURE*

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When state controls were relaxed in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death, the emotions of pride and love for Lithuania again received expression in Lithuanian literature. At first these feelings were coupled with the ideals of the socialist state, but later, in the sixties, writers and poets found various ways and means to express unequivocally their national pride.

A distinguishable manner by means of which the national identity was asserted was the poet's glorification of his native town, of his native village, of the landscape and of familiar nature settings in general. Another source of inspiration and admiration appears to be objects of the Lithuanian cultural heritage. A number of poets, such as Janina Degutyte (born 1928), Jonas Juškaitis (b. 1934), Judita Vaičiūnaitė (b. 1937), to name only few, wrote several cycles of poems interpreting and meditating on the paintings of Mikalojus K. Čiurlionis (1875-1911), who distinguishes himself by his symbolistic, mystic, and abstract style. Other poets devoted their efforts to the glorification of the lives and works of famous personalities in the history of Lithuania. For example, in several rather lengthily poems the historical veracity of a considerable number of events was recreated in such a manner that on the historical, anecdotal, or semi-legendary base a mythological aura was superimposed. That is to say, great Lithuanian historical individuals appeared as epic heroes with mythological powers rather than as mere mortals. For instance, the poet and playwright Justinas Marcinkevičius (b. 1930) in his poem *Donelaitis* (1964) created a myth about a realist Lithuanian poet - priest Kristijonas Donelaitis (1714-1780). Pastor Donelaitis was born and lived in East Prussia, where Lithuanians were threatened with the loss of their ethnic character due to the tremendous influx of German colonists. In his poems, *The Seasons (Metai)*, depicting mainly the village life of Lithuanian serfs, Donelaitis calls for a preservation of Lithuanian traditions, language, and customs. Marcinkevičius, in his poem, attempted to depict, as he has stated in an interview, "physical annihilation of a part of the nation and its spiritual immortality." Actually, it is a tragic chant and a combative address to the Lithuanians about the perils of losing their national identity in the face of foreign rulers. The most characteristic feature of the poem *Donelaitis* is that it extols the poet-priest as one who manifests the vital forces of the nation, the one who became also an inseparable part of the Lithuanian nation:

Now every lump of earth —

Donelaitis.

Now every tree —

Donelaitis.

Now every sword —

Donelaitis.

Now every wooden plough —

Donelaitis.

And every footprint on our feet —

His grave and his place of rest.

He covers the whole planet with himself,

Like a long peasant coat.

In a similar mythical transfiguration, Sigitas Geda (b. 1943) envisages the priest-poet Antanas Strazdas (1763 -1833) in the poem *The Thrush (Strazdas, 1967)*. Poet-priest Strazdas, halfman, halfbird extends his wings "from sky to earth" over the poverty and misery of Lithuanian serf villages: "Lithuania — She is encompassed in his huge shadow."

Poet Antanas Miškinis (b. 1905) devotes a poem *Reverie and Revolt (Svajonė ir maištas, 1987)* to a young Lithuanian poet Jonas Janonis (1896-1917), who had joined the communist party, but committed suicide in St. Petersburg just two months before power was seized by the Bolsheviks. In the dramatic style of the ballad, Miškinis depicts an upsurge of the elemental force of the people against tyranny. Janonis' futile dreams for happiness in the face of life's adversity is portrayed in a mythological way.

By the middle of the 1960's, the works of literature that were appearing bore witness to the emergence of a new trend in the expression of national identity. More and more writers, especially poets, drew their imagery and subject matter from ancient Lithuanian mythology and folklore; similarly, they took over its rhythm and style. At the beginning of the seventies, the adaptation of Lithuania's oral tradition is clearly defined and, no doubt, is one of the most striking characteristics of Lithuanian literature, distinguishing it from other national literatures in the Soviet Union.

Lithuanian folklore and mythology have been sources of inspiration for writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries until the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union in 1940. Many of them employed various stylistic devices of Lithuanian folk songs and legends, and successfully adapted them to the compositions of poetry and prose. However, this trend was abruptly discontinued in 1945 after the severe criticism that was directed at poet Kazys Boruta (1905 -1965) for his mythological tale-novelle *The Mill of Baltaragis (Baltaragio malūnas, 1945)*. This apparently served as a sufficient warning to writers not to deal any more with themes whose sources were rooted in Lithuanian folklore. We find only few transgressions, as for example, in children's literature, where several Lithuanian folk tales were re-created and crudely adapted to the precepts of socialist realism.

With the first signs of the so-called thaw in the Soviet Union, Boruta recreated in lyrical prose and verse a collection of tales and fables *Sky is Falling (Dangus griūva, 1955)*. It dealt mainly with the world of domestic and wild animals and birds, but allegorical implications are clear, for each creature signifies a certain aspect of human conduct and character. The overall mood and atmosphere of his mythological, fanciful world is gay and witty; even quarrels between the various animals are portrayed in a playful manner. In comparison with the dull, semi-literate works of that time, Boruta's tales appear as a refreshing breeze in the stifling atmosphere of a hot summer. The Russian poet, S. Marshak, overwhelmed by the unusual beauty and moral spirit of Lithuanian folklore, translated Boruta's tales into Russian.

The success of this collection apparently encouraged Boruta to continue his creative efforts, probing deeper into the treasure of the Lithuanian oral tradition. In 1963 he completed a tale, *The Wanderings of Jurgis Paketuris (Jurgio Paketurio klajonės)* based entirely on materials taken from various legends and tales, especially those involving lies and fools, where everything occurs in a grotesque and absurd way. The tale takes place in a medieval-feudal society, which in many aspects resembles some authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. While tending the bees of his liege lord, Paketuris loses a bee and is consequently sent out to look for it. During his search Paketuris experiences fantastic adventures and encounters many stupid, wicked people whom, however, he manages to outsmart. The tale is the best adaptation of folklore to date, which combines humor and wit with wisdom. Under the guise of a fable, Boruta was able to voice his protest against injustice, exploitation, and the ignorance of the human race.

Lithuanian pagan beliefs embody a feeling of close association between man and earth and man and plants. In Lithuanian folklore there are countless comparisons of man with nature: man is born of the earth; after death, he is reunited with the earth in order to be reborn later as a man, or as a tree, etc. Similar associations of man and nature, and life after death in nature, can be found in various poetic expressions and works by Lithuanian poets, especially in the poetry of Marcellus Marinaitis (b. 1936), Janina Degutytė, and Judita Vaičiūnaitė.

Martinaitis creates, in a complex and sophisticated way, a private and intimate universe, domestic and rustic, where boundaries between past and present Lithuania are effaced and where those between life and death disappear. Everything from the past takes place simultaneously with the contemporary. There is no death, but rather a continuous, transforming process of becoming, of growth, of deterioration and rebirth. In his collections *Along the Stairway of the Clouds (Debesų laiptais, 1966)*, many metaphors come to mind through the effective, imaginative use of the word "grass." The grass withers in the autumn and "again returns to the primal form, to a green birth."

*From blood and mud it grows clean and green.
It cleanses the earth, existing now for a caressing
hand and for a plough.
And I myself will be overgrown by grass...
— "We Are Born For Grass and For the Rivers"*

This metaphor of "being overgrown by grass" appears several times with different connotations in the collection of poems *The Cycle of the Sun (Saulės graža, 1969)*. Some of them are associated with human beings, where dying is compared to a metamorphosis: "to die is slowly to change into grass and to be silent." For instance, a son lamenting for his mother envisaged her not only as the flame rising from the splint of the elm— splints of wood served to illuminate the homes of ancient Lithuanians— but also as the verdant grass: "O dear mother, dear mother—you are the green grass from under the snow." ("Lamentations of Justinas at his Mother's Grave").

Sometimes Martinaitis' meditation leads to an intimate experience that is akin to Lithuanian folk belief. For instance, he envisages "a dead man is still standing out of habit with a staff in his hand by his home." Hearing how "ancestral spirits are moaning in the burning trees," Martinaitis wonders whether "the fire already is summoning everybody into one family" ("Tranquillity", *The Cycle of the Sun*).

In Degutyté's poetry the symbol of fire reminds us of the times when Lithuanians worshipped fire. In her poem "The Prayer to the Earth", *Northern Summers* (*Šiaurės vasaros*, 1967) she implores the earth goddess Žemynėlė to come "with fields of rye," "with weeping birches," while she, as the Vestal Virgin (*vaidualutė*) "will keep vigil over the sacred fire / In the green depth of forests and nights."

The ancient graves and cemeteries often put Degutyté into a pensive mood. It is notable that she, adapting the style of the old folk songs to her own, is able to convey successfully the belief of pagan Lithuanians that the deceased have their own life after death. For instance, while looking at treasures discovered in the ancient graves—golden rings, bronze pitchers, etc.—she compares her fate, which is unknown to her, with the fate of the deceased owner for "whom everything is final and tranquil."

*For that journey there was provided you both food
and drink
And you have found your only place in the native
earth,
But we,
From what kind of echelon
Will begin that road?
In which ashen mound
Shall we leave our rings?*

*In which star
Will one lay for us a pitcher of mead?*

"Midways," *The Full Moon* (*Pilnatis*, 1967)

In the same vein, Degutyté meditates in the cemetery on the eve of All Soul's Day. The cemetery is compared to a city of the dead. The deceased are perceived as the living, ones who are definite victors, who "never will be defeated" and "whose sorrows" and "whose screams are already under the silence of the earth" ("Cities of Dead," *The Glaring Snow*, *Šviečia sniegas*, 1970).

Among the Lithuanian poets seeking to assert their ethnic identity through their perception of simultaneity, or, more precisely, through their vision of the homeland as transcending the limitations of time and space, Judita Vaičiūnaitė is the most prominent. Whereas the timelessness of Lithuania in Martinaitis' poetry is conveyed through the periodical change in nature and through a metamorphosis of man, Vaičiūnaitė perceives the past, the present, and the future immediately and almost simultaneously. In her poetic perception, there are no temporal barriers, and all spatial objects attracting her attention are perceived in a sort of timeless continuum. For example, in the cycle of poems called "Ancient Markings," *Under the Northern Coat of Arms* (*Po šiaurės herbais*, 1968), she examines the imprints of a horseshoe, of suns, and of grass-snakes that are imbedded in ancient stones used for pagan altars. She envisages prehistoric villages, "pagan paths and fords through the swamps," senses "the odor of fir trees and junipers," and returns rapidly to the present moment, having still in her "mouth a bitter taste of smoke" from the sacrificial altar. The stone with the imprints of suns projects her senses into the past where a prehistoric woman perceives both the present and the future simultaneously:

*She touched a rock, cool from a night's hoar frost
And she felt in the rock a pulse of the cities which still were not begun.*

A remarkable type of Lithuanian folk poetry is the funeral lament-dirge and, similarly, wartime lamentations (*raudos*), characterized by monotonous and recitative melody in expressing a feeling of mourning and inconsolable grief. The function of these laments was twofold. On the one hand, they were an integral part of the funeral ceremonies which were supposed to influence favorably a deceased one's fate in the realm of the dead as well as to assure a continuous relationship with the living members of the family. On the other hand, they served as the means of expression of the miserable conditions of those who were left to live.

Expression of sorrow and of life's hardships and the pagan credo of a life beyond death are obviously alien to the doctrine of socialist realism; nevertheless, several poets of Lithuania successfully imitate the style of traditional laments and copiously use their rhythm, intonation, vocabulary, and imagery. These aspects lend a strong ethnic, almost local character, to their lyrics. The most characteristic in this respect are the poetic laments of M. Martinaitis and J. Degutyté.

In Martinaitis' collection of poetry, *The Cycle of the Sun*, there are six poems, entitled simply lamentations (*raudos*) of various people and birds. These poems are a curious re-creation of sorrowful moods, and of an air of the naiveté and primitivism of the traditional laments. For example, a mother mends the glove of a fallen son and laments that "her son's

little legs lie in Kuršas" and his "little hands freeze in Prussia" ("Lamentations of the Mother Mending a Glove of the Fallen Son"). As she "will wail out a white patch by the black one," "a green one by the white," so that "his hands and legs will return home." It is obvious that Martinaitis uses symbolic expression to the pagan belief that laments help the dead: for her fallen boy "the red patch will light like the sun," "the black one will serve as a letter" that he will send to his mother, "the white one as a road to return," and "the green one as the grass beckoning him to mow it." In the poem entitled "Lamentation of Justinas at his Mother's Grave," a son bewailing his dead mother cries out that "no one will tend the fire at home" and that the "fire will be cold without her." He wished "to be dead and to stay with her in the green mound and to be silent for ages."

A common Lithuanian folk belief is that a cuckoo can foretell the future. A similar belief is conveyed in a beautiful poem of Martinaitis entitled "Lamentations of Cuckoos," where an individual laments that he has comprehended from the calling of the cuckoo his hard and sad lot. Upon his return home, he will find his father, sister, and brother dead. In other poetic lamentations Martinaitis expresses the complaints of other people, for example, how their life is full of sorrow, wrongdoings, and misfortunes. An orphan laments bitterly how she was mistreated, exploited, and finally thrown "out on the road" by those "who ride, are rich, and have shoes" ("Severiutė's Lament"). Adapting the style of folk laments, Martinaitis deals with subject matters that heretofore have been treated so rarely in Soviet Lithuanian poetry. In his poem, called "Half-Witted Annie's Lament", Martinaitis describes how this little Annie found a red yarn of a sock on the road and began to sob. The more she observed objects around her, the stronger grew her weeping. In a manner of ancient waiver, she deplores the fate of a lark whose "nest will be soon destroyed by a plough", and the death of "a bee who fell into a pond". "The hungry mother-bee will wait in vain for her return with honey". The footprint of a child in the sand reminds little Annie that "a child will grow up and later become old"; and she weeps as though "the house had been destroyed by fire."

Degutytė also uses folk laments as her mode of poetic expression, but in a more direct and less sophisticated fashion than Martinaitis. Without stylistic disguises or pretensions she fulfills both roles, namely, the wailer and the person who experienced the grief and misfortune. The most characteristic mode of expression in this respect is the poem, called "Lamentations" (*The Full Moon*) which sounds like a genuine folk funeral lament. Degutytė bewails a deceased person, describing how she searched for him in vain in the empty house, in the wheat field, how "fir trees were moaning and ferns were startled" in the forest. Finally she calls out to him:

*I asked the rivers, where are you.
I asked the clouds, where are you.*

*The rivers answered: you are not in the earth.
And the clouds' answered: you are not in the sky.*

*Who now will dress my long hair?
Who will break me off some yellow honeycomb?*

*Meadows are cold and painful in the morning.
Hands are hot and empty all evening long.*

*Tell me, as what kind of flower will you sprout forth?
Tell me, as what kind of wind will you awaken?*

In some of Degutytė's poems the physical objects of the native country, such as trees, plants, and the sun, converse with the wailer and even assist him. In her poem "Bread of the Mother-in-law" (*Northern Summers*) the bride laments to the "little pine tree" how "the brans in the bread of the mother-in-law choke her," how the mother-in-law demanded her to do impossible things, as for example, how she sent the bride to "bring in the green, fresh hay of the winter, the snow of the summer." The pine tree advises her to "break off its branch and to dip it into foam of the sea"; "the branch will be the hay and the foam the snow." In the poem "On the High Hill" (*Northern Summers*) a sister bewails her brother who fell in the war and asks the sun: "Who will help me to mourn." The sun promises to mourn together with her:

*I will come to you as the mist for nine mornings in succession,
And on the tenth morning, I will not rise at all.*

Sometimes the style and rhythm of funeral laments are fused with the imagery of folk songs. Such is the case with Degutytė's poem "Let Us Go Home" (*Northern Summers*) where an exiled girl, lamenting how far she is from her homeland, asserts in the manner of a folk song that she and others like her will return home, dead or alive:

*Nine miles to my mother,
Nine miles to the native land . . .*

*We shall return as the triangular flocks of cranes;
We shall return to the threshold as warm ashes.
The ground of the hill will sink from our standing.
The little fence from the ash tree will incline from our leaning.*

*We shall return from the oceans as a foam of milk,
We shall return from the seas as a foam of blood.*

In conclusion, it is necessary to add that the rather widespread usage of Lithuanian folklore and mythology in Soviet Lithuanian literature is not a leading, but, nevertheless, a significant trend. First, it exhibits distinct national features, in many aspects resembling the literary traditions that prevailed during the 20's and the 30's in independent Lithuania. In this way the gap between the literary heritage of the past and the literature of the present was, to a certain extent, bridged. Second, mythological and folkloric materials appear to be a powerful mode of literary expression. Due to it, literature acquired a new dimension. For example, funeral laments and mythology enabled writers to depict man's suffering; his sorrow, as well as his spiritual life, were represented more profoundly and more vividly than ever before. Under the guise of fable they ventured into the realm of fantasy and dream.

No doubt, the great concern with folklore among the intellectuals as well as government support gave an impetus to the revival of folklore in Lithuanian literature. For instance, at the Institute of Lithuanian Language and Literature in Vilnius a number of professional ethnologists and folklorists are preoccupied mainly with the collection, classification, and publication of Lithuanian folklore. Its archives are the largest in the Soviet Union with more than 800,000 items of folklore. In 1968, a selected collection in five volumes, entitled *Lithuanian Folklore (Lietuvių tautosaka)*, was completed; it contains the most characteristic and significant examples of the main genres of Lithuanian folklore. Also, a number of scholarly works have been published, the most outstanding of which are works such as *The Value and Originality of Folklore (Tautosakos savitumas ir vertė, 1970)* by D. Sauka, *Style and Genres of Lithuanian Folklore (Lietuvių tautosakos stilius ir žanrai, 1971)* by A. Jonynas et al. However, it is one thing to collect and study folklore and another to use it in contemporary literature that adheres to the doctrine of socialistic realism. Folklore mirrors the remote past, its pagan beliefs, and morals, which are alien to Soviet ideology. Therefore, one finds occasional negative remarks in the press about "slavish adherence" to folkloric materials in literature. One of the more direct diatribes was voiced by the poet Alfonsas Maldonis (b. 1929) during a meeting of the Lithuanian Writer's Union in Vilnius in the spring of 1971. He criticized the so-called young writers, specifically referring to their works that "adhere to the current vogue, such as folk culture and folklore." Another speaker, the poet Antanas Drilinga (b. 1935), was more explicit:

"Lately in the works of young writers, especially in their poetry, there appears once again an adherence to the fashion of the times: to adorn their works with spangles of bronze, to return, if not to the Stone Age, then at least to the time of heathenism or to the Middle Ages, to seek for the exotic in these ages. A desire for such a return is not a bad thing in itself, yet, when it becomes the aim of poetic creation, the prism through which one attempts to look at the world, such a desire is no longer normal and by all means it is not always acceptable." Literatūra ir menas, No. 17, 1971.

* A paper delivered at the Fifth National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Dallas, Texas, March 16, 1972.