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THE EXPERIENCE OF EXILE IN LITHUANIAN LITERATURE

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The apocalyptic second coming of the Soviet armies to Lithuania in 1944 threw many Lithuanian intellectuals, professionals and writers into the darkness of exile. These people were, perhaps, even more anxious to escape the Soviet rule than anyone else, because they remembered particularly well that the genocidal mass deportations of Lithuanians during the first occupation of 1940-41 were directed most of all against the educated classes.

This exodus created a paradoxical situation, where the gentle arts in the native land itself took decades to recover, not only because of political oppression, but also due to a shortage of writers and artists, while in exile the literary life began a vigorous growth as soon as the war was over. Not only were schools reestablished in the D. P. camps, but also literary journals, book publishing enterprises, literary prizes, theater, and even opera.

On the other hand, it was of course impossible to continue with the previous literary trends and themes as if nothing much had happened. Something did happen: there was the enormous fact of exile, which made everything irrevocably different. In the descriptions of things and feelings the traditional artistic images lost their previous context in the alien land, and all familiar human concerns became transformed or subdued by the ever-present bitter knowledge of dispossession.

Lyric poetry, consisting as it does of brief statements of experience, was able to respond most quickly and sensitively to the fact of exile. Some poets reacted in simple and naive anguish, like small children awakened suddenly in a alien place. Of these, Kazys Bradūnas (b. 1917) communicated most directly the physical sense of loss which overwhelms a farmer torn away from the familiar objects in his native house and field. His first book in exile, *The Alien Bread*, (1945) is full of small painful vignettes of daily experience where the smell of a flower, a bend in the river, or the pale light of the morning would deceive and comfort the traveler by their intimate familiarity — only to shock him afterwards with the realization that the flower was not known at home, the river bears some strange German name, and the morning promises another day of hard labor for alien masters.

Another poet, Jonas Mekas (b. 1922), who later became known in the United States as the "granddaddy of the underground cinema," retreated from exile into the inner spaces of memory, where he reconstructed his simple native village in slow, fluid verses which sanctified and retrieved from time every detail of peasant life in the native land. His book *The Idyls of Semeniškiai* (1948) does not idealize that village as if it were some unreal Arcadia, but, rather on the contrary, it concentrates on all the harsh, earthy aspects of peasant life through all the heat, and mud, and biting cold of the seasons. This life becomes lyrical and beautiful because it is suffused with the warm glow of the poet's love which transforms all physical details into symbolic and magic signs signifying the immortal bond of earth and man.

An older poet, Bernardas Brazdžionis (b. 1907), who had established his reputation during the years of independence as a Christian mystic in love with sonorous rhetorical cadences, reacted to exile with fiercely patriotic verse in which the outrage against the injustice to his nation and the defiance of tyranny were raised to a highly emotional, almost hysterical pitch. The stance he took in such works as *Alien Mountains* (1945), or *The Northern Lights* (1947), or again, *The Great Crossroads* (1953) was that of a poet and prophet, calling his people to persevere in prayer and hope and to testify to the whole world about the cruel fate inflicted on his nation. Over the years, his poetry evolved into a kind of pilgrimage across the alien universe, toward the receding native shores of hope. Many of his poems centered around the image of a weary traveler with the burden of injustice on his back and the jewel of faith in his heart, calling to his God in all the crossroads of the world. This image was in essence a structural repetition, in a different, pathetic context, of his earlier basic imagery, where human life as such was basically conceived of as a journey toward a metaphysical home of the soul beyond the gates of death.

Jonas Aistis (b. 1904) added his prophetic voice to that of Brazdžionis, but in another key. Before the war, Aistis had become popular as an impressionist poet, mainly concerned with the sweet pain of love, who liked to experiment with new imagery and new rhythmic structures, at times almost forcing his poetic language to transcend itself, that is, to achieve a deep emotional meaning, even at the price of making very little sense grammatically. Strangely, Aistis experienced and expressed in his poetry the feeling of an "exile even before anything happened to his country. This was because he went to France before the war, from where he looked longingly at his beloved Lithuania until the Bolsheviks came, and he was stranded in Villefranche-sur-Mer. At the time when other exiled writers were overcome with the grief of dispossession, Aistis had already accustomed himself to this condition, and so, he spoke up in the stern voice of conscience, reproaching his compatriots for having forsaken their fatherland in its hour of need. In the collections *Longing for the Nemunas River* (1947) and *Sister Life* (1953) Aistis' poetic devices returned to a more traditional mold, and the former romantic themes were supplanted by moral and philosophical ideas turning around his nation's tragic destiny.

In the numerous prose works by a variety of writers, similar sentiments of tragic loss and yearning prevailed, with perhaps this one difference, that the prose writers did not really become exiles in their minds as quickly as the poets did. Many of their novels and short stories continued to speak of matters which were relevant to Lithuanian life before the catastrophic events of 1944. Some of them had their setting in the time of German occupation, others still in the days of independence, and others again concerned themselves with the events of the first year of Soviet occupation. Among the latter, an important place belongs to a novel called *The Crosses* (1947) by Vincas Ramonas (b. 1905). Its main subject is the collectivization of the Lithuanian countryside during the first year of the Soviet regime in 1940. Ramonas skillfully brings out the tensions that lay underneath the placid surface of life even before the Soviets came, only to erupt in the open, with neighbors and brothers attacking each other, in defense of opposing ideologies, but also, and perhaps more essentially, in pursuit of their personal desires to seize new land or to protect one's old possessions. Against the background of the early years of exile, when no one possessed anything, this novel acquired a bitterly ironic relevance all of its own.

Other writers turned away from memories of the past toward the present, and for them the experience of exile acquired another quality — that of alienation. These were mostly younger people who were not bound by the requirements of native literary tradition, because they had little experience at writing within the context of Lithuanian reality. They were open to all the sensory impressions of the new and alien lands, as well as to the most recent literary trends in the West. As it happened, the postwar reality in Western Europe was full of ruins, death and fear, while its literature began to reflect the cosmic hopelessness which always accompanies the collapse of a civilization. In such circumstances, these young writers were able to grasp another meaning of exile. It was for them not a meaningless, abnormal thing, but the natural state of man in the universe. Not they alone, but humanity as a whole became for them a homeless tribe, lost in an alien world.

Some of these writers, like Aloyzas Baronas (b. 1917) expressed their confusion as to our moral values which, so carefully nurtured in the Judeo-Christian tradition, did nevertheless culminate in cruel and senseless destruction. In his collection of short stories entitled *Stars and Winds* (1951) Baronas depicts man as an incomprehensible paradox, full of contradictory impulses, who can develop a smoothly functioning set of rational beliefs and then use those very same logical procedures in order to destroy himself. His novel *Footbridges and Abysses* (1961) depicts a group of Lithuanian slave laborers, driven from their land by the Germans, who engage in sardonic, pointless philosophizing among exploding bombs and cries of dying men.

Algirdas Landsbergis (b. 1924) undertook a different task. He recognized the destruction of all established patterns of meaning in life in a novel called *The Journey* (1954) in which a young refugee from Communism, an apprentice monk, travels not only physically across the ruins of Germany, but also mentally, through his recent memories of home, so juxtaposed with the given experiences of the moment as to create an altogether new time sequence, where the present may well be a preliminary condition for fulfilling a mental event in the past, and where the hometown monastery may well stand in the middle of a German town, forming a continuous landscape with a spiritual topography all its own. The effect is that of a new mosaic, made from shattered pieces of a world which used to make perfectly good sense that cannot now be reconstructed. The hero of the novel, wandering in a kind of mental haze, picks up these pieces and tries to fit them together in a new design, unrelated to the logic of the past, which would somehow explain to him the meaning of his life. The people he meets become symbolic of various sets of values that prevailed before the catastrophe of the war, and personal interactions with them amount to a search for new sets of meaningful human relationships.

Underlying the work of both Baronas and Landsbergis is a certain yearning for a humanly acceptable truth, that is, for a truth that can still somehow stand for both goodness and beauty, and even for a transcendental faith, testifying to the presence of God, who will, in the end, explain and justify everything, even if His new revelation should seem very strange from the traditional perspective of man's moral history. The poet Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas (b. 1919) goes beyond this yearned-for image of God, into a frozen void of meaningless eternity — the true home for the exile who calls himself man. His book of poems, entitled *The Symphonies of Dispossession* (1946) concerns itself with two of the basic illusions of man. One illusion is embodied in man's everlasting urge to seek far horizons, both physical and spiritual, as if there were an Eldorado, somewhere at the end of the world, where man can find his own fulfillment. The vague outlines of some kind of ultimate promise trouble the soul of man from the very dawn of consciousness, so that even his cradle, says Niliūnas, resembles a ship of the conquistadors, in which the pale-eyed infant stands, yearning for something in the blue expanses of the sky, visible through the window. There is, of course, no Eldorado, and all the haunted travelers of the world never reach any particular reality; they are thus exiles by definition. The other basic illusion of man is represented by his yearning

for the cosy fires of home — it is the dream of a lost wanderer who thinks that he has grasped a profound truth about the meaning of life, namely that Eldorado is really the one native spot on earth where we first open our eyes. Home forsaken then begins to glow with wondrous hues of nostalgic remembrance, while in actuality, in the context of Niliūnas' world as an exiled Lithuanian poet, that wondrous home is only a tortured, bloody land far away.

The beginning of the 1950's marked a kind of dividing line in exile Lithuanian literature between the early sorrow of the D. P. years in Germany and a search for new directions on the American continent. A number of writers, including the already-mentioned Bradūnas and Niliūnas, grouped themselves in 1952 around a new journal, "Literary Folios," which called for a rededication to craftsmanship in art, and for a creative effort to organize into new and coherent esthetic entities both the Lithuanian heritage and the new, cosmopolitan influences coming from world literature. Sometimes these writers were called the "earth" generation, because of an anthology they published by this name, and also because in their work they began to elaborate the mythology of the native Lithuanian soil, against the framework of the universal myth of the earth as the ultimate mother in death and as the womb of resurrection. This gave their yearning for the lost homeland a more philosophical and cosmopolitan cast.

Naturally enough, the dispossessed farmer, Bradūnas, was at the center of the new mythology. In several collections of poetry entitled *Nine Ballads* (1955), *Marshland Fires* (1958) and *The Silver Bridles* (1964) he elaborated the concept of man's existence as a sacrifice at the altar of life and thus also at the altar of both pagan and Christian God, in the native land, over the course of centuries. His poems retained a surface simplicity, a naive and charmingly personal wonder at the beauty of earth as a living organism, but they also became symbolic and complex in their implied references to the continuum of life through all the Lithuanian generations which had sacrificed themselves in order that their land should prosper green again and again.

Nyka Niliūnas in later years, in the collections *The Tree of Orpheus* (1954) and *The Vigil of April* (1957) began to fill the void of dispossession with mythological and metaphorical universes of his own. The fate of an exile became for him only one among a number of possible human conditions in which to seek fulfillment as an artist. Thus he first of all expanded his sets of references: in addition to the wind, and rain imagery which so strongly dominated his first book, surrounding the walls of his native house remembered as if in the arms of huge windswept trees, Niliūnas now drew upon ancient Greek and Latin mythology, the distant call of blood and passion, as if it were another vision of Eldorado. The works of Renaissance artists, particularly the symbolic landscapes of the painters, also entered Niliūnas' poetic universe, not to become a substitute for homeland lost, but to provide new forms for the poet's own metaphorical constructions, a new and more complex poetic code, where each statement of personal experience reaches out, through varied sets of symbols, toward statements of universal value. What we see in these later books is really a kind of autobiography of the poet's mind: the native soil, the mute realities of grass and stone and tree, acquire a voice in the images of people dear to the poet, whom he has left behind; that voice is then enriched by the artistic, philosophical and mythological references of all mankind. Outside the walls of this new complex poetic universe, however, the void remains, death is waiting, and the poet prefers to meet this death on his own terms — those of his poetic world, instead of accepting the gift of metaphysical consolation brought for us by the blood of the Savior.

Another poet belonging to the 'earth' group is Henrikas Nagys (b. 1920). His poetry is simpler and more romantic than that of Niliūnas, because its character, imagery and meaning is controlled by a set of emotions which simplify the potentially innumerable complexities of human experience. The native land, the exile, the chaotic and ominous noises of the modern world — are filtered through the poet's feeling and come out as a sequence of romantic, even melodramatic images. Among basic emotions of Nagys as a poet one must count first of all the consciousness of the deathward flow of time. In his book *November Nights* (1947) time measures itself in the rhythmic beat of a bird's wings, in the ticking of the clocks, in the heartbeat of the poet, and even in the metaphorical transformations of landscape, where, as in one poem, the evening comes as a huge black cloud-coffin, carried on the bare branches of ancient oaks against the burning sunset. Another feeling is that of friendship: purified, made incandescent in the deadly flow of time is the intimate brotherhood of creative hearts, poets, seekers, rebels — the brothers of Nagys, treasured in intimate faith and love, coming from a variety of places and periods of history. Rebellion itself, or, rather, the restlessness of the seeker for truth, is another dominant emotion. Finally, underlying both time and friendship and juxtaposed against the catastrophe of exile, is the feeling of childish freshness and directness in the perception of reality. The yearning to recover this freshness, and with it, perhaps, that which is dear to the poet in his lost homeland, permeates all his books, including *The Sundials* (1959) and *The Blue Snow* (1960). Nagys' latest book, *Brothers the White Winged Spirits* (1970) transfers this direct and innocent sense of reality into a mythical country, a timeless Lithuania, recognized as the inner core of all folksongs and all historical mythology.

The genre of prose has its own representative from among people close to the 'earth' group, namely Albinas Marius Katiliškis (b. 1915). His first published works were collections of short stories in the D. P. camp setting, where often a lonely romantic hero, who had lost his dearest people and possessions, is silhouetted against the drabness and stupidity of the refugee world. Soon, however, Katiliškis turned to novels and with them back to the scenes of his native land. The novel *The Shelter* (1952) is basically a *recherche du temps perdu*. An exiled Lithuanian farmer, shaken and inspired by the sight of an evening cloud formation, exactly like the one he once saw at home, is transported in his mind to his native village and describes all the daily comings and goings of life there with such an intensity of feeling that the whole prosaic reality, without losing its texture and flavor, is transformed into an incandescent dream. The next novel, *Autumn Comes Through*

the Forests (1952) is set entirely in prewar Lithuania and describes the changes brought to the countryside by the forces of modernization against the background of illicit love. More relevant to the experience of exile is Katiliškis' last novel *The Trip of No Return* (1958) in which the dreadful fate of Lithuanian slave laborers made to dig trenches for the German army in the bloody nightmare of East Prussia in 1944 is depicted in an impressionistic, highly emotional style, where the enormity of the outraged feeling seems to distort the very structure of the book, producing a chaos of emotions which transcends even that of the war itself.

The romantic and symbolic treatment of the theme of exile does provide the reader with a certain esthetic or emotional satisfaction, and for this very reason it may fail to reach the full traumatic depth of the experience. There is something about the violent separation of men from all that life has meant to them which is not at all beautiful even in the artistic sense; it is something very dark and terrible, something completely senseless and ugly beyond enduring. It cannot really be described directly by means of art, but a number of the emigre Lithuanian writers did feel the essence of it in the marrow of their bones and did try to give this horror an expression utilizing the experience of those trends in Western art which tried to arrive at an esthetic statement of human condition through the medium of absurdity and death. The first writer to work in this direction, who began already in the D. P. camps, was Antanas Škėma (1911-1961). He has written a number of short stories, but the main force of his creative achievement rests in his plays and in his one novel *The White Shroud* (1958). That novel and, really, all of Škėma's work, resembles a tortuous and prolonged attempt at a dialogue with an incomprehensible silent God, whose presence reveals itself only in the suffering and total destruction of man. The hero of the novel Antanas Garšva, a former nobleman, warrior and poet, is now an exile and an elevator operator in some huge hotel in New York, much resembling the lower of Babylon. As he sends the elevator up and down through the floors, his own mind travels across many layers of memory suffering confusion and despair until the total meaninglessness of it all culminates in a horrible scream of terror, after which Garšva goes insane and thus achieves an absurd, vegetable happiness. The same scream of terror is heard repeatedly in his plays, such as *The Awakening* (1956), *The Candlestick* (1957) and *The Christmas Skit* (1961). The plots of these plays range from the Lithuanian resistance against the Bolsheviks during the first occupation, where man's humanity finally reasserts itself through unspeakable tortures in the interrogation cells, to the interiors of an insane asylum, where the inmates put on a play in which the symbolic killing of an actor representing Christ turns out to be dreadfully real. The ultimate notion underlying Škėma's work is that man, because of his divine spark, his capacity for creation, is by definition an exile in a death-oriented universe ruled by blind mechanical laws.

The plays of Kostas Ostrauskas (b. 1926) pursue the theme of absurdity also in the formal sense, in that their whole structure and theatrical devices follow rather closely the contemporary theater of the absurd. But the main preoccupation is death itself — its human, philosophical, metaphysical absurdity, given the fact that we, as human beings, are capable of conceiving eternity, after which we must cease to exist. In his plays, Ostrauskas seems anxious to inch his way up, as closely as possible, to the fact of death, at times, as in the play *The Pipe* (1951) even moving beyond the grave, in order to comprehend it somehow, or even, if possible, to find a way for the human spirit to prevail over this absurdity. That play deals with the last day on earth, relived by a player named A after he had already been dead for some time, long enough anyway to partially decompose his brain. He was killed by another player, named Z, because A would not sell Z a pipe. This pipe supposedly has a huge diamond hidden in it, but in the play itself that pipe is also a character, an unseen womanly presence, who constantly makes amused, sardonic comments upon the ridiculous hopes of all mankind, from A to Z. In another play, *The Gravediggers* (1967) two people are somehow forced by death in female shape to bury themselves in a cemetery. Death is again sardonic, but also sexy, and also very wise; she exchanges bantering chatter, quoting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* abundantly, with one of the men, who used to be a tragic actor. Exile as such becomes relatively unimportant in Ostrauskas' plays; what truly matters is the skill of the playwright in devising sufficiently absurd situations and stage language in order to create the illusion of human dialogue with an unimaginable non-presence called death, hoping, as it were to defy it, to achieve a measure of victory in the act of protest itself.

Algirdas Landsbergis, who was mentioned in connection with the novel *The Journey* is also a playwright. Indeed, as time goes on, his interests turn more and more toward the theater, and also more toward the grotesque and the comical, but as was the case with Ostrauskas, he does hide a noble human defiance within the folds of all-enveloping absurdity. He began in 1958 with a play called *Wind in the Willows*, where a historical theme was treated in a fairly standard romantic manner. A later play, *Five Posts in the Market Place* (1966) is set in a Lithuanian anti-Soviet guerilla camp at the time of the ultimate destruction of that whole movement. There the noble, but also terrible and absurd duty of the guerilla leader to go on his way to the very end conflicts with his very human need for ordinary romantic love. Landsbergis' comedy *The School of Love* (1965) pulls out all stops in the effort to give a grotesque and comical treatment to a rags-to-riches story of the Horatio Alger type, involving a small-time Lithuanian entrepreneur transplanted to the United States, where he achieves fantastic success by establishing a school of love.

The youngest born of the exile writers in the group presently discussed, and the youngest one to die, Algimantas Mackus (1932 -1964) was a poet most intensely dedicated to the theme of exile and death. His first, quite unsuccessful, book of poems, called *Elegies* (1950) contained standard patriotic sentiments à la Brazdionis. Nine years passed before the appearance of his second book, *His Is the Earth* (1959), and in that time Mackus apparently understood the irrelevance of elevated poetic rhetoric to the true experience of exile. Consequently, in his second book, Mackus radically changed both his poetic language and his ideas to proclaim that exile is not merely something that happens to innocent bystanders in history, but that it is also something we must do — namely, absolutely to discard and reject all faith in the possibility of

happiness and home in the universe. For him it became a question of honesty and precision in the creative use of words. Every time we use words with unrelenting integrity in today's catastrophic world, we see more and more clearly that everything that men usually believe has no substance to it at all. Thus, his second book, and also the following one, *The Generation of Unornamented Speech and Its Words* (1962), became a kind of funeral procession, burying, first of all God, then hope, then fatherland and finally, the poetic language itself. All poetic symbols and metaphors expressive of life: the black color of earth, the green fragrance of grass, the image of Lord's guardian angel, life-giving water — everything was reversed to signify death and oblivion. The uncompromising honesty of Mackus' effort gives his poetry a dark and tragic grandeur — it becomes a stern judgment pronounced by a victim of contemporary civilization upon all the illusions of man which led him to the self-destructive holocaust of war. Mackus' final book, *Chapel B*, which is a tragic celebration of the death of Antanas Škėma in a traffic accident, came out posthumously in 1965, after Mackus himself was killed in the same manner in Chicago.

In conclusion, one should mention briefly three writers who do not fit into the mold of this paper, because the experience of exile and its ramifications never played a very significant role in their work. Two writers, Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius (1882 -1954) and Antanas Vaičiulaitis (b. 1906) are people of the older generation, who had fully developed their themes and style in independent Lithuania and who could only continue on their own path if they were to keep their artistic integrity. The third, Henrikas Radauskas (1910 - 1970) reached his greatest heights as a poet during the years of exile, although his work itself, dedicated as it is entirely to the wonder and mystery of art, completely transcends such human vicissitudes as exile, or even death.

Krėvė-Mickevičius, who before he died had grown in stature to become a kind of patriarch of the modern Lithuanian letters, pursued his work in three main directions: first, romantic legends of ancient Lithuania written in an elevated, musical style which brings them very close to the genre of free verse; second, realistic; stories of village mores and daily life in Lithuania, where also incomprehensible, wonderful poetry of human existence as such, provides the underlying theme; and finally historical dramas centered in the period of the Lithuanian empire in the Middle Ages. In exile Mickevičius completed his major epic on a Biblical theme, called *The Sons of Heaven and Earth*.

Vaičiulaitis is an impressionist writer of delicate, iridescent verbal textures, whose main novel, *Valentina*, which came out in 1936 and again in exile, in 1951, depicts the sweet and tragic intoxication of love. His recent works have been short stories, legends and fairy tales, in which he continues to be the gentle master of intricate stylistic designs around the theme of the ultimate victory of man's humble faith in beauty and in God.

Henrikas Radauskas has a good claim to be the greatest Lithuanian poet of any time. His extraordinarily complex verse may be called modernistic in that it strains the inherent logic of language to its very limits in order to make each word carry a tremendous load of implied meanings, allusions and new semantic entities resulting from unexpected juxtapositions of images and concepts within the structure of a poem. Radauskas utilizes the entire heritage of universal mythology, as well as the achievements of man's intellect and of his religious passion, in order to construct a series of poetic statements which culminate in the creation of a verbal universe that in itself is much richer and implicitly more profound than the sum total of human experiences in ordinary reality, because it can juxtapose and relate to each other areas of thought and feeling which would have no relevance to each other outside of art. The main thrust of Radauskas' poetry in his books *Arrow in the Sky* (1950), *The Winter Song* (1955) and *Lightnings and Winds* (1965) is, therefore, toward the establishment of art as a third absolute reality, coequal with those of life and death as ultimate ontological entities, and in contrast to all other human experience which may be nothing more than a web of illusions.

In the end, it might perhaps be said that the experience of exile, traumatic and stultifying though it may have been in many ways, did not so overwhelm the creative powers of the Lithuanian writers as to reduce them to stunned silence, or else to inconsequential rhetoric. Rather on the contrary, it evoked a response from the creative imagination which in itself is unique and valuable on its own terms.