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IMAGES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOVIET LITHUANIAN LITERATURE

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Sociologists approaching literature either try to relate the style and content of literary works to the social conditions under which these works have been produced, or they endeavor to reveal the sociology of the writers themselves — to show how the writers interpret society (or rather what interpretation their writings *imply* to an analytical reader, even when the writers themselves have not consciously intended to present such an interpretation).¹

I shall adopt the latter approach and offer an analysis of the images of young people, aged between eighteen and twenty-eight, presented by four important writers of Soviet Lithuania in their books published in the latter half of the 1960's in which the younger generation has a central role. The analysis is concerned (1) with the descriptions of character and emotion presented in these works and (2) with the mechanisms these writers appear to assume as having shaped the personality patterns they are describing.

Virtually all of the young adults depicted in these books come from backgrounds in which the old, pre-Soviet and the new professional bourgeoisie have become almost indistinguishable. Nearly all of these young people have had, or probably are going to have, at least some college education. Their general orientations toward life may be described as self-expressive rather than careerist. The images of youth in these works of literature may be most representative of that part of the younger generation which has these characteristics. They are not necessarily typical of the working-class or peasant youth (or of the devoted young scientists or the political manipulators).

A Political Parable

The first case to be analyzed is a short play, "The Pensioner," by one of the three major playwrights of Soviet Lithuania, Kazys Saja, born in 1932.² Several eighteen-year old youths, members of a high-school graduating class, reveal themselves in personal essays and in a clash with an authority figure — a retired officer of the security forces, the husband of their class teacher.

The young men in this play search for personal purity and anticipate becoming corrupted in the future. The present is marked by a pervasive sense of boredom, discontent, general unhappiness. The young people merely reveal these characteristics and project the image of vulnerable, not particularly rebellious proto-romantics.

If there are any clues to the causation of this psychological condition, they must be sought in the personal character of members of the older generation. To a harshly authoritarian Communist a humanitarian member of the party is juxtaposed; therefore the dominant ideology must not be blamed for the sense of boredom, depression, and anticipation of being corrupted.

It is perhaps significant that the disciplinarian Communist has been affiliated with the security forces and is now dying of cancer, while the younger and healthier humanitarian Communist — his wife — is an educator. These thematic linkages suggest an optimistic image of the evolution of the Soviet society — from the cancer of police harshness to the light of humanitarian Marxist education.

Such an evolution might, however, be expected to inspire emotions of warmth and enthusiasm in the young — rather than discontent, boredom, and anticipation of corruption. The sources of the latter kind of emotion are left unexplained, but sociologists have demonstrated that these are the typical responses to a sense of inefficacy — the sense that one cannot

do anything to shape the kind of society one lives in. The optimistic political parable of *Saja* contains the evidence repudiating it. Apparently the father knows best and is not completely dying after all.

A Metaphysics of Exalted Love and Grotesque Lovelessness

More profound is a full-length play by the second leading Soviet-Lithuanian playwright, sixty-eight years old, Juozas Grušas, *Love, Jazz, and the Devil*.³ Two or all three of the young men in the play are employed college dropouts, the fourth is a seventeen-year old high school girl. They are amateur jazz musicians, and (except for the girl) search for intense experiences in ecstatic music, alcoholic intoxication, wild dancing, insulting language, and mutual fights. Their behavior is casual, impulsive, marked by sudden changes of mood and unmotivated actions. As in *Saja*, there is a strong sense of boredom. It is consciously interpreted by them as a response to the lack of meaning and adventure in their life. But their subconscious (given voice by a group of psychiatric patients) senses that this is a consequence of the loss of illusions and of hope.

One of the young men is a casual seducer without any evident passion, another is obsessed with the imagery of murder and rape, apparently without having actually committed any. The casual seducer is, appropriately, the son of a bourgeois philosophy professor, an expert on the conception of love in German idealism, who has nevertheless turned out of his home the seventeen-year old mistress of his son with an infant on her arms. The rhetorician of violence (and an actual thief to boot) is the son of a Communist prosecuting judge who has once tortured the philosophy professor. Their sons are great friends, and this suggests the interpretation that their character can be viewed as a product of the historical clash between the idealist thesis and the materialist antithesis, represented by their fathers. The synthesis, however, is not a higher-order thesis in the Hegelian manner, but an inner emptiness in search of shifting intensities.

Interestingly enough, both the seducer and the aggressor come from "good" homes. Both of their mothers are dead, but they seem to have been loving mothers, close to both their husbands and their sons. The fathers, too, appear to have been concerned and basically decent parents. On the other hand, the two more attractive characters — the innocent girl who radiates the purity of love and the fourth man who keeps resisting the pull of evil represented by his friends — are the products of a home broken by desertion of both parents and a foundling, respectively. It is the product of good homes that are repelled by goodness, and the offspring of bad homes who are attracted to it.

Clearly the perverse attraction to the evil *cannot* be explained, in the manner of the dinner-table sociologist, by family backgrounds and must be sought elsewhere. The most obvious explanation of it is indeed the ideological dialectic previously suggested: the clash of the idealist thesis with the materialist antithesis produces an emotional emptiness. But the more exact source of this emptiness seems to be the fact that both fathers have *betrayed* their own brand of humanism — the philosopher by his ineffectual bookishness, the withdrawal of love in the real-life situation in which it was called for; the prosecutor by his participation in the torture of helpless human beings defined as "enemies of the people." The emptiness of the synthesis is the consequence of betrayal (and therefore invalidation) of two ideological goods. This is how dialectics really operate, rather than as conceived in the grand fiction of historical dialectics. Or at least this is a *possible* formulation of the causal model suggested by Grušas' drama.

I suspect, furthermore, that for Grušas the idealist thesis represents not Christian idealism, but a secular derivative of it. The professor is interested in the German philosophers and in Seneca, but not in Christian thought. Regina, his wife, — possibly a symbol of the Queen of Heaven (and with a character consistent with this image), — has died long since. It is for Grušas, quite possibly, the departure of faith which leaves a void in the souls of men that *forces* them to betray their humanitarian ideals. And for their children not even ideals are left. For Grušas, as for Dostoyevski, the disappearance of God leaves a Satanic void.⁴

The two other characters of Grušas' play are, to varying degrees, immunized against this corruption of the soul by their dream of the Return of the Mother — the bad mother who has deserted her children. Curiously enough, the two deserted children do not blame their mothers, because (they think) this betrayal has been motivated by the love of their mothers for someone else, while the betrayals of the ideological fathers have been impersonal, without love. Grušas finds residual goodness in whatever is done out of love, even a mother's desertion of her children; and ultimate evil in whatever is done without love — writing books, building a presumably more just society.

This seems a little off-key psychologically and should probably be interpreted in metaphysical terms. At some level, I suspect, the deserting mother whose expected return inspires nobility is Grušas' image for religious faith. The mother — the faith of the church — has died altogether for the children of reason, but she has only deserted those who still have illusions and she might therefore return after having repented of her own selfishness. This dream of the return of the bad mother might be a disguised vision of a decontamination of religious faith from its complacency and its questionable alliances of the past. It is this vision which sustains "the temptation of goodness" — until the innocent girl is assaulted and unintentionally killed by the children of reason.

The unhappiness which for *Saja* seems to come from a distorted balance between the social institutions of coercion and those of education is for Grušas a desperate ugliness that derives from the lovelessness of people shaped by the struggle between alternative kinds of rationalism.

A Social Psychology of Ambiguity

The two prose works I have selected for analysis eschew both metaphysics and political parable and limit themselves to fairly realistic behavioral description and the stream of consciousness. In his most recent novel, *My Haven is Turbulent*, a leading writer born in 1928, Mykolas Sluckis,⁵ describes a twenty-eight year old television cameraman with artistic ambitions stumbling through a marital crisis during 1968 or 1969, with flashbacks to the past. The other novel, "The Marathon," is by one of a constellation of the novelists of the youngest generation, born in 1944, Leonidas Jacinevičius,⁶ and deals with a writer in his mid-twenties who is suffering from a kind of slowly encroaching de-emotionalization of his life.

Some psychological elements are common to most of the young adults depicted by all four writers: a boring discontent, the sense of being surrounded by ugliness and falsity which must be rejected and yet insinuates itself into one's soul even during the act of its repudiation; the lack of fulfilling, exhilarating, memorable experiences or feelings; the complete irrelevance of ideas or symbols or rituals or books or heroes or historical events of any kind; an amorphous urge for self-expression, experience, authenticity, a valid uniqueness, creativity. The young people lack a "rockbottom certainty," for which they sometimes envy the peasants, and a long-term commitment to anything in particular. They constantly experience a sense of impermanence of everything around them and in themselves. They are homeless in their own hearts.⁷ Movement is for them a state of lifelessness masquerading as life. Their social relations are almost invariably disappointing to themselves and to everyone else.⁸ They are skeptical and fluid characters who dissolve into fragmentary experiences, grow apart from each other, and never experience anything that would establish or confirm a distinctive personal identity. (Identity crises are experienced in the Lithuanian novel belatedly, by men in their thirties and forties — former dogmatic Communists or, sometimes, Catholics.)⁹ The personalities of the younger men and women do not evolve over time but scatter themselves around in meaningless acts or freeze up within themselves. And at the end of young manhood seems to lurk the emptiness of a sad indifference.

In accounting for this personality pattern, the novelists substitute a social psychology of the ambiguities of the private life for the political parables of Saja and the metaphysics of exalted love and grotesque lovelessness of Grušas. A major role in producing the ambiguous, unattached personality of their young adults seems to be assigned by the two novelists, particularly by Sluckis, to the parental family. Both Sluckis and Jacinevičius describe a similar type of parental home: the mother is a strong woman, self-sacrificing, a compulsive domestic worker, not very happy in marriage, and eventually becomes quite distant from her son, the father is amiable but with weaknesses — in one case, a military hero who deserts his wife and son and then tries to return but is rejected by her, in the other a teacher who believes himself to lack in convictions as well as achievements. This is becoming something of a stereotype of the middle-class Lithuanian family of the older generation. But these family backgrounds are also similar to those which Kenneth Keniston found among the American alienated students — the "uncommitted" — in the 1950's.¹⁰

There is an interesting difference in the attitudes toward love between the older writer, Grušas, and the younger ones. While for Grušas maternal love (as we have seen) has the mysteriously saving quality which it had in some folk tales, both Sluckis and Jacinevičius demonstrate that, for young adults in a period of rapid social change, love, as Bruno Bettelheim has said, is not enough. The mothers of the protagonists of both novels are devotedly loving — and totally incomprehending. The source of their inability to reach their sons seems to be a sharply drawn generational difference in perception (and self-perception). All that is important for the older generation is clearly defined, absolute, a persistent structure. Whatever is relevant to the young is ambiguous, blurred, inconsistent, open-ended, in flux; all absolutes are perceived by them as coercive and artificial rigidities.

While Grušas relies on a metaphysically explained lovelessness as an explanation of evil, the younger novelists get busy on the generational and other gaps between different modes of perception. An unperceptive love appears to them worse than a sensitive perceptive-ness without love. Indeed no manner of love is much good for any of the people who seek, give and receive it in their novels. And the authors themselves, especially the youngest ones, seem to be moving away from the mythology of love to a *poetics of responsible perception of the everyday life and of ordinary people*. (Responsible = sacred, pantheistic; with faith in the intrinsic value of the object perceived and/or sense of the hurt one imposes on others by perceiving them in one's own manner, etc.)

The opposite of this poetics, or the consequence of its absence, is a state of indifference. Jacinevičius describes the cumulative nature of the process of growing into a state of indifference. Small acts of human betrayal, — the bullying of the high-school poet, unfeeling bureaucratic manipulations, erotic games of the tired-businessman variety — add up to an ossification of sensibility. A vision of the loveless society, certainly, — as in much of recent Soviet Lithuanian fiction, — but nothing about this condition is perceived as deriving from the peculiar organization of the Soviet society or the ideological dynamics to which it has been subjected. It is the casual indifference of normally decent people, in a society without distinctive characteristics, that add up to a state of disgust.

Some of these indifferences have been acts of the main character of the novel. He would indeed want to be judged for them by someone who is worth judging him, but cannot find anyone. In his world of accumulating indifference, there is no one close to him in age and character who is a consistent upholder of any set of values worth respecting. Consequently, no one can judge and no one can point beyond judgment.

The Alienated and the Protean

This image of the youthful personality is similar to what Kenneth Keniston has found in the alienated American students — the "uncommitted" — of the 1950's. It differs from the personality pattern Robert Jay Lifton has discerned among the American students of the 1960's, the "protean man."¹¹ The "uncommitted" young adults of Soviet Lithuanian fiction differ from the "protean men" by the lack of the kind of expressive energy that leads contemporary American students into all sorts of conversions, social movements, and colorful rituals. This expressive energy of the 1960's has not yet reached Soviet Lithuania (or perhaps merely not been reflected in the novels dealing with youth).¹² It is conceivable that the mode of existence of a Soviet minority republic suppresses the dynamic protean man and forces the sensibility of the young into the mould of a lethargic, somewhat old-fashioned alienation. Even in dealing with alienation, the Soviet Lithuanian novelists have neglected the most exuberant literary model — the great tradition of the "fool."¹³ Something of the "protean man" and the "fool" has indeed made its appearance in Grušas' play. But the younger Soviet Lithuanian novelists still seem to be so surprised by the emergence of the psychological type of the alienated youth that they have not hit upon an imaginative literary manner of envisioning it. With a few exceptions (such as a tenderly expressionistic, dream-fragment army story by Saulius Šaltenis),¹⁴ the novelists are still recording the facts.

A Vulnerability in Search of Devotion

Still, the young writer in Jacinevičius' novel has the dream of a brotherhood of men working in a vineyard on the other side of a river, on an unnamed task, whom he is running to join but cannot quite reach. This suggests a dimly felt need for collective dedication to a great, but freely chosen project, one that has not been preplanned for the individual. Such a task, which would revitalize him, is not yet available to this young man, — for reasons which he does not explain, — but at least he entertains the possibility of a devotion that he might realistically share with others. The other visionary element in his character is his commitment to remain vulnerable to life, rejecting all protective guises, refusing to "play games," and to keep going — the note on which his novel closes.

This theme suggests my image for characterizing the sensibility of the younger Soviet Lithuanian writers — a *vulnerability in search of the sources of energy to resist ossification*. Persued to its ultimate limits, — which it has not been so far — this conception of the task might be able to sustain a rejuvenation of the novel in Soviet Lithuania. Or anywhere else.

1. "... it very frequently happens that his (the writer's) desire for aesthetic unity makes him write a work of which the overall structure, translated by the critic into conceptual language, constitutes a vision that is different from and even the opposite of his thought and his convictions and the intentions which prompted him when he composed the work." Lucien Goldmann, "The Sociology of Literature: Status and Problems of Method," *International Social Science Journal*, 19 (1967), p. 497.

2 K. Saja, *Mažosios pjesės* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1968), pp. 181-208.

3 Juozas Grušas, *Meilė, džiazas ir velnias*. Tragiška komedija (Vilnius: Vaga, 1967).

4 Cf. Joseph Frank, "The Masks of Stavrogin," *The Sewanee Review*, 11 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 660-691.

5 Mykolas Sluckis, *Uostas mano — neramus*. Romanas (Vilnius: Vaga, 1968).

6 Leonidas Jacinevičius, "Maratonas," *Rūgštynių laukas* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1968), pp. 125-226.

7 Saulius Šaltenis, *Atostogos* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1966), p. 68.

8 In contrast, nature is a stable consoling framework to which one keeps returning and then feels in harmony with one's own proper matrix. Much of the quality of "innocence" in recent Soviet Lithuanian prose derives from this sense of boundness with nature — a romanticism with rural origins, rare in Western Europe, a Hamsunianism without Hamsun's hero worship, brutalism, and contempt for reason. Cf. Leo Lowenthal, *Literature & The Image of Man: Studies of the European Drama and Novel, 1600-1900* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 190-220.

9 Jonas Mikelinškas, "Trys dienos ir trys naktys," *Lakštingala — pilkas paukštis* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1968), pp. 104-254; Alfonsas Bieliauskas, *Kauno romanas*. Romanas (Vilnius: Vaga, 1966).

10 Kenneth Keniston, *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society* (New York: Dell, 1967). The pioneer in elaborating this image of young adulthood in Soviet Lithuanian literature in Romualdas Lankauskas (born in 1932).

11 Robert Jay Lifton, "Protean Man," *The Partisan Review*, 35 (Winter, 1968), pp. 13-27.

12 "But the (current) tradition of romanticism (in Soviet Lithuanian literature) has not dared to revive the rebellious discontent with the present, the state of war against the prevailing forms of evil, spiritual deadness, and satiated complacency, which the romantics of the early nineteenth century lived by. Contemporary romantics... desire unity and forgetfulness more than struggle . . . the mood of the literary work is a quiet coming to terms with whatever is." V. Kubilius, "Romantizmo likimas," in Vytautas Kubilius, ed., *Šiuolaikinės lietuvių literatūros bruožai* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1969), p. 447.

13 William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

14 Saulius Šaltenis. "Mėnesiena," *Nemunas*, 1968, No. 1, pp. 10-19.