

# God's Whispers in a "Godless" Literature

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A few years ago an ideological writer in Lithuania posed the important question: "How are the problems of religion and atheism reflected in our literature?" His answer was disarmingly negative: "We haven't even the simplest novella or story on an atheistic theme." He also added that atheistic publicism was non-existent.<sup>1</sup>

This is an unusual admission in a land where atheistic journalism of the tabloid variety flourishes throughout the media and where almost 50,000 members of the Zinija association — a branch of the Russian Znaniye ("knowledge") Society — and countless freelancers eagerly seeking financial and professional advancement are engaged in propagating militant atheism.

A more optimistic, but not very convincing, assessment was made in a book published in 1984, which set out to prove that "free-thinking and atheism are an inseparable element of our culture".<sup>2</sup> In a series of articles, Lithuanian folklore and literature were ransacked for examples of anti-religious materials, including what could be called the "fakelore" of the Stalin area, which are then proudly presented as evidence of an "anti-religious culture". The infinitely richer religious folklore and literature are simply disregarded. But even in this book there are admissions that Lithuanian writers are reluctant to join the anti-religious crusade:

The feelings of religious believers have become a certain bugbear for our literary people who stand at the threshold of anti-religious themes.<sup>3</sup>

Religious motifs, images and ideas survive in Lithuanian literature despite relentless efforts to "uproot superstition". To understand this paradox, one must take into account the special character of Lithuanian literature, which has always been permeated with religious spirit, both in the broadest sense of the term, as a mystical perception of a cosmic design and purpose, and in the specific sense of the Christian or Roman Catholic tradition. Many of the most outstanding Lithuanian writers have been clergymen. The Soviet occupation and the subsequent compulsory

atheisation of Lithuanian culture therefore occasioned a profound shock which led to a feeling of displacement. The mass exodus of Lithuanian writers to the West in 1944, when Soviet troops were again inundating Lithuania, presented Moscow with a unique opportunity: a new generation of writers would be raised in the proper ideological and atheistic spirit, and they would help to secure Lithuania for Leninism.

The results, forty years later, are deeply unsatisfying for the regime. It can even be said that literature in Lithuania is often religious, sometimes agnostic, but rarely atheistic in spirit. The broadly "religious" sentiment is especially noticeable in poetry. Poets may undergo the proper atheistic indoctrination and brandish the correct atheistic credentials, but poetry disdains the superficial and seeks out deepest memories, turning to the wellsprings of childhood. For many poets, a substratum of imagery and emotion survives from the deeply religious milieu of their childhood. This is expressed, for example, with a special poignancy in a poem by Justinas Marcinkevičius:

O native home, my father's splintered wooden shoe,  
 a cup of warm milk at dusk,  
 my sister's prayerbook . . .  
 . . . A cow's warm muzzle,  
 Communion wafer clinging to the palate.<sup>4</sup>

Here the poet conjures up the magic ingredients of his childhood, including religious objects and emotions, and in the last two lines evokes a nativity scene.

Religious imagery still seems to come naturally to Lithuanian poets, especially when they write of love. Vilija Šulcaite, for instance, fuses religious and erotic language in the manner of medieval mystics or the metaphysical poets:

Once I comprehended the miracle,  
 I was resurrected.  
 My soul was waiting for you.  
 For your touch . . .  
 When I comprehended the miracle,  
 I became an overflowing vessel.  
 Will you still my thirst?  
 Will you find the heaven,  
 Where the signs of my love are recorded?<sup>5</sup>

Whenever the poets seek words to express an "oceanic feeling", or to register a mystical vision, religious language offers itself to them as a natural source of expression and they use it almost unconsciously. In this sense, they still have not severed the links with the Judaeo-Christian

tradition. Even where, as in the poetry of Sigitas Geda, the Judaeo-Christian model is not predominant, the quest remains essentially religious. To conduct his dialogue with the "spirit of the universe" Geda explores pre-history and various mythologies as well as ancient and oriental religions.

Meanwhile, however, the regime would like the Lithuanian poets and writers to recite clear and firm atheistic convictions, in the manner of Albinas Žukauskas:

Through her, through Europe,  
We acquired the Judaic oriental shepherders' religion,  
The worship of the lamb:  
The shepherders' enchantments, their superstitions.<sup>6</sup>

But Žukauskas, secure in his 19th century atheistic certainties, stands almost alone among Lithuanian poets, like Flaubert's Monsieur Homais surrounded by latent mystics. Equally lonely are the didactic pieties of *Žmogus* (Man), the collection of poems by Eduardas Mieželaitis which was awarded the Lenin Prize and was heralded as a harbinger of a new, non-religious cosmology; the book, an attempt at a synthesis of Enlightenment and Soviet "humanism", has dated very rapidly.<sup>7</sup>

Some poets in Lithuania, like Gintaras Patackas, maintain a position of ambiguity:

At a risk of breaking my neck  
I cheerfully gaze at Europe  
Through a rectory window  
Shattered by an atheist's blow  
  
You strumpet of Londonviennaparis  
In exchange for my native tongue  
I will stretch on your cultural layers  
Like god on the cross.<sup>8</sup>

These two stanzas can be interpreted as religious, anti-religious, or simply as a young poet's exuberant wordplay.

In other cases, religious imagery is used to "resacralise" the spiritual barrenness of the modern landscape:

The lucid  
Gothic of the morning's cathedral  
within and above us  
you are crowned by the thorns  
of the swallows'  
flight  
and pierced by  
the pain of a supersonic plane.<sup>9</sup>

Prose is easier than poetry to control and to subject to the requirements of “socialist realism”, one of which is active atheism. But there are stirrings and surprises in prose, too. One of the recent novels of the Lenin Prize winner Jonas Avyzius ends with an image of the emptiness left after the destruction by the Soviet authorities of the Three Crosses that once overlooked the city of Vilnius from a hill — not a mere void, but a wound, or a Sartrean “nothingness”.<sup>10</sup> The popularity of so-called “magical realism” among some Lithuanian writers coincides with a new emphasis on the soul which, according to the novelist Saulius Tomas Kondrotas, “alone makes us different from objects, and yet to which we pay less attention with every passing day.” There is a visible spiritual thirst in the despiritualised official world of Lithuanian letters, governed by the laws of historic determinism and philosophical materialism.

A substantial quantity of devout and sincere religious poetry regularly appears in the Lithuanian underground periodicals. Although most of it is amateurish, there have been some notable exceptions. Several young poets have treated religious themes in a modern poetic idiom, in the pages of the *samizdat* periodical *Pastoge* (Shelter) published by young Catholics.<sup>11</sup> The first issue of the periodical is dedicated to Mindaugas Tamonis\*, who has become a legendary figure for many young Catholics. In one of his poems he seems to sum up the burden of his generation:

. . . past the giant cross  
in the field of Dawn —  
bent over, we carried  
our total faithlessness . . .  
still silent the sand  
the water  
and the burning bush.<sup>12</sup>

The publishers of *Pastoge* have acknowledged that forty years of compulsory atheisation have exacted a toll in Lithuania. In the minds of the Lithuanian writers of the middle generation, surviving religious images rub elbows with atheistic stereotypes that have been gradually absorbed. In an open letter to Romualdas Granauskas, one of the outstanding prose writers in Lithuania and one not given to recitation of official slogans, a contributor to *Pastoge* nevertheless accuses him of “infantile atheism” and continues:

Your list — human love, the love of the country — is much too

\*Mindaugas Tamonis, a poet and engineer, committed suicide in 1975 at the age of 34 after being injected with depressant drugs in a psychiatric hospital in Vilnius. This followed his refusal to restore a monument to the Red Army, and his sending of a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party calling for a referendum to re-establish the Lithuanian national state. See *RCL* Vol. 7 No. 2, 1979, pp. 81-82 and Vol 11 No. 1, 1983, p. 84 — *Ed.*

short. And where is divine love? God is love and in Him all other loves are contained and acquire their depth. You have not heard of it? Nothing unusual. It is not as much your problem, as that of your entire generation of forty-year olds, with your sterilised roots.<sup>13</sup>

The place of the short-lived *Pastoge* was taken by another periodical, *Lietuvos Ateitis* (Lithuania's Future), which warned that the very survival of a distinct Lithuanian nation is impossible without the preservation of a viable Roman Catholic religion:

Without religion you will be different, not at all like those who are a riddle to the world's linguists and historians;<sup>14</sup> you will have lost the original world feeling that gave birth to the folk songs and to Ciurlionis . . .<sup>15</sup> How else could we have borne history's cycles, all this disintegration and destruction, all that contempt and deprivation of rights? Only our love for the indestructible Creator of the Universe . . . only the certainty and depth of feeling has guided our nation through these days . . . Either we shall remain true to ourselves, and advance, or we shall fall between history's millstones and turn to dust.<sup>16</sup>

This theme is echoed in the *samizdat* play, *Pasivaikščiojimas menesienoje* (A Walk in the Moonlight), which ranks with the best works in the underground literature of Eastern and Central Europe.<sup>17</sup> Set in a tightly supervised psychiatric hospital masquerading as a rest home for senile apparatchiks of a criminal regime and for non-conformist youths who have fallen foul of that regime, the play demonstrates the decline of a Utopian regime which has suppressed the traditional religion. For the pseudonymous author, suppression of Christianity leads to the inevitable decay — a theme frequently to be found in the Lithuanian underground press. The play can be seen as a sad epilogue to Orestes' "self-liberation" in Sartre's early play *Les Mouches* (The Flies): the dismissal of God (Jupiter), which Orestes jubilantly announces as the beginning of human freedom, actually leads to enslavement. Towards the end of the play, one of the characters implores divine assistance:

How long, O Lord? Or is your wrath eternal?  
Is there no end to your ferocious burning?  
O Lord of Charity, return, forget, forgive.  
Without your light as begging wolves we live,  
Venom and salt of tears is our daily bread,  
Without your mercy life itself is dead.  
O Lord, your light on our faces we implore,  
Once we have seen you, we'll be saved once more.<sup>18</sup>

And yet the play ends on a note of Beckettian hopelessness:

Lord of . . . love and charity . . . come back . . . and we'll be saved . . . speaks THE MAN. But these words die on his lips; his whole being speaks of exhaustion and indifference.<sup>19</sup>

Marxists-Leninists, like positivists in the previous century, maintain that religious belief is but one passing stage in the history of human consciousness. George Steiner recently echoed this view when he said: "It may be the case that nothing more is available to us than the absence of God."<sup>20</sup> This is a parochial attitude because it disregards the revival and passionate affirmation of religion in Central and Eastern Europe. God's whispers are heard even in the lines of Lithuanian writers who are not allowed to affirm God's presence or even to deplore His absence, while underground authors and young writers who have emigrated come to religious writing with natural ease. Lithuanian literature strongly suggests that religion, as Mircea Eliade has said, is not a passing stage but an element in the structure of our consciousness.

<sup>1</sup>Gintaras Jatkonis, "Confrontations with Religion", *Literatura ir Menas*, Vilnius, 17 April 1982, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>*Išsklaidytos iliuzijos* (Dissipated Illusions). Vilnius: 1984. Reviewed by Jonas Mačiulis, "A Theme That Is Also Actual Today", *Kultūros Barai*, Vilnius, No. 10, 1985, pp. 46-48.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>4</sup>Justinas Marcinkevičius, *Poezijos pavasaris* (The Spring of Poetry). Vilnius: 1975, pp. 39-40.

<sup>5</sup>Vilija Šulcaite, "Mozart's 'Magic Flute'", *Pergalė*, Vilnius, No. 9, 1981, pp. 59-64.

<sup>6</sup>Albinas Žukauskas, "The Ancient Mother", *Literatura ir Menas*, Vilnius, 12 December 1981, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Eduardas Mieželaitis, *Žmogus* (Man). Vilnius: 1962.

<sup>8</sup>"At the Beginning of an Age", *Pergalė*, Vilnius, No. 1, 1978.

<sup>9</sup>Almis Grybauskas, *Atklydimai* (Wanderings Homeward). Vilnius: 1983.

<sup>10</sup>Jonas Avyžius, *Chameleono spalvos* (The Chameleon's Colours). Vilnius: 1981.

<sup>11</sup>*Pastogė* (Shelter), No. 1, 1978.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup>The author is alluding here to the view of many scholars that Lithuanian is the oldest living Indo-European tongue.

<sup>15</sup>Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1857-1911), the famous Lithuanian visionary painter.

<sup>16</sup>*Lietuvos Ateitis* (Lithuania's Future), No. 7, 1983.

<sup>17</sup>Typed manuscript.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>"A New Meaning of Meaning", *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 November 1985, pp. 1262, 1275-76.