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POETRY BY DANUTĖ PAŠKEVIČIŪTĖ AND ALĖ RŪTA: CROSSPOINTS BETWEEN ÉMIGRÉ WRITING AND THE LITERARY TRADITION

Lithuanian émigré poetry, as other émigré writing, including the subject of this analysis, tends to be a discursive representation of the frontier between the homeland and the country of immigration. This poetry inevitably entails a realignment of the association of identity with the motherland, perceived as a source of wholeness. As claimed by Susan Rubin Suleiman, homeland is frequently aligned with the perception of identity as dissociated from the recognition of selfhood in terms of continuous change, hybridity and hyphenation. Irresolvable tensions and multidimensional ambivalences, on the other hand, unavoidably mark gradual self-alignment with the hyphenated or diasporic identity [15, 4–5]. This dovetails with Salman Rushdie's argument that the discursive representation of hyphenation inevitably implies a continuous interaction of borders. This may take beyond the consideration of cultural bifocality that is commonly associated with émigré writing. The notion of bordering may represent more than identity in terms of binaries of "Us" and "Them". It also invokes a re-consideration of borders with regard to hierarchies that such cultural crosspoints may imply [9, 277, 278].

One such hierarchy is related to problems centered on the critical reception of émigré writing. Many an émigré author attempted to connect the poles of existence in diaspora by their texts, concentrating a conception of past and present existence within these poles. Meanwhile, a dispersion of present-day self-realization is being reflected via categories of "I" and "Other". The purpose of this article is to reveal the semantic spectrum of existence in the works by émigré poets Danutė Paškevičiūtė and Alė Rūta. Further, it is to analyze subjectivity and self-realization actualized through creative expression. Actually, it was the negative criticism about these authors, which appeared in "Lietuvių egzodo literatūra, 1945–1990" (Lithuanian émigré Literature), that provoked the topic for this discussion. Such criticism compelled contemplation about problems that are

centered on the canonization of literature, if not the setting of standards for quality judgment of literary texts. There is a closely related problem, which is a treatment of woman writer as "Other" in the logocentric discourse permeating the literary tradition.

As illustration, it is probably pertinent to refer to the critical reception of the poetry by émigré writer Danutė Paškevičiūtė. As stated by Algirdas Titus Antanaitis, "Danutė Paškevičiūtė (Klimienė, born in 1926), who has poems and articles printed in the press of the émigré community, also issued her only poetry collection, "Aš negaliu verkti" (Beyond Lament) (1961) during the early part of the 1960s. Her blank verse of various line length lay out personal narratives of her experiences. These lack originality, and often, the most essential elements of poetry" [1, 452].¹

The critic describes her poems as largely focused on inner feeling. The discursive modes of this evaluation, if not regarded as distinctively minor, are envisioned as significantly departing from qualities that make a literary work good or great. The problem involved in the reception of a literary work can hardly be, in any way, a correlative of gender. However, the overt negativity reverberating in Antanaitis' argument makes it difficult not to invoke Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's statement that women artists often feel strangers in the "male palace of art" and their work is frequently judged as "'odd' in relation to the predominant male literary history defined by the standards of what we have called patriarchal poetics" [3, 72].

According to Ruth Sherry, "there is an implicit assumption that the best or the greatest writers and texts are ones which survive their own time". Implicit in this assumption is, however, that reception of a literary work is not entirely independent of gender and, by implication, power. These correlations, according to Sherry, in effect condition the writer's inclusion into or exclusion from the literary tradition [12, 27]. The postmodern emphasis on arbitrariness and decentering have instigated a repositioning of hierarchies as well as a redrawing of many borders, including those marking the boundaries between gender and literary excellence or even legitimacy of the text per se. Sherry takes issue with just this situation, when she comments: "It is historically typical that groups which are asserting, or attempting to gain, increased political power will resurrect and re-examine cultural phenomena

¹ My translation from Lithuanian into English.

and achievements of their own group in earlier times, and will encourage members of their own group to make distinctive cultural contributions" [ibid., 27].

The historical moment that conditions the resurrection and re-examination of literary texts that had existed outside the mainstream of, broadly speaking, canonical texts within the national literary tradition may be due to a number of reasons. One possible reason is the vast geopolitical changes caused by the processes of European integration and massive globalization. With regard to émigré writing, the late Lithuanian critic Vytautas Kubilius considers cultural migration and cultural resistance in the following way: "The literature of Lithuanians living in exile veered towards an aim of retaining national identity under new conditions of life. This literature changes the behavior, nature, and language of fellow nationals. It is meant to awaken a longing for the Lithuania left behind – it describes the beauty of the country until it was viciously axed down by history. It is meant to enkindle hope – we shall return and continue the existence of an independent country. It must draw the limits of past and present national identity in order that we not forget who we are"² [7, 63].

Such a view about the role of the writer blurs the boundaries between the personal and the collective. It rather foregrounds active involvement by the artist with issues of public concern. Such a view may partially account for the above-mentioned Antanaitis's skepticism that was explicit in his reading of Lithuanian émigré Paškevičiūtė's poetry as a dramatization of personal experience. Furthermore, it is also important to correct Antanaitis's account of Paškevičiūtė's works. Paškevičiūtė also had novellas published in "Draugas" (Friend) and "Darbininkas" (Labourer) newspapers and "Moteris" (Woman) magazine [5, 80].

Gender sensitivity aside, it must be remembered that Paškevičiūtė's only collection of poems "Beyond Lament" was published in 1961.³ It can be assumed that her writing may have been affected by developments in American poetry after World War II. As stated by Richard Gray, the post-war period exhibits "rediscovery of the personal in American poetry", which "has assumed many

² Translation from Lithuanian into English by Vijole Arbas.

³ All translations of poetry by Danute Paškevičiūtė and Ale Rūta from Lithuanian into English are mine.

forms – as various, finally, as the poets involved” [4, 225]. Situating the subject of the present analysis within the context of American poetry is not intended to suggest delusive flexibility with regard to standards of excellence. Rather, this is an attempt to point out that Paškevičiūtė’s poetry also veers towards exploring, what Gray would call, “the self’s discovery of the outer world and its reactions to it” [ibid., 227].

In Antanaitis’s account, however, Paškevičiūtė’s poems are no more than “personal narratives.” The designation of poetry as a “narrative” is confusing, even given the implied biographical aspect, which Antanaitis seems to treat as a negative correlative limiting both qualitative and quantitative aspects of Paškevičiūtė’s poetry. The biographical element, on the other hand, is inevitably present in most émigré writing. If Paškevičiūtė’s poetry is read as a projection of experience onto text, it could be treated in the light of Robert Frost’s statement that writing is “a momentary stay against confusion” [2, 126]. In other words, Frost suggests that we can order chaos by imagination and creation. Similarly, the experience of the comprehension and the evolution of selfhood at the moment is closely related to weaving between past and present because it is a common human desire to understand oneself in the context of history. The creation of self, coming from an identification with the past via an identification with the instability of the present, is suggested in Paškevičiūtė’s poem “The Longest Journey”:

*Today I hold a letter from there:
The home left so long ago.
They write that our house
And barn have been demolished,
A thicket of birches has grown near the road.
Only the same sky remained.
And there my feet touched the grass.
There I wept for the black starling,
Soaked by drops of rain falling from the roof.
There we laid my grandfather to rest.
Along the same road we led him to death.
The bell tolled in the cemetery chapel
Where time counted old crooked crosses.*

*Down the same road, twisting past the swamplands and woods,
 One generation of ancestry to the other,
 Wading through quagmire autumns,
 Faded lives passing to death.
 Today is the day I walked home along the cobble stones of memories
 To look at reflections of heaven in the waters of the quagmire.
 I travelled the very longest journey to home. [7, 12–13]⁴*

⁴ "Ilgiausia kelionė":

*Šiandieną varčiau laišką:
 Tėvskė mana seniai juk palikta.
 Jie sako, kad nei pirkios tos nėra,
 Nei svirno.
 Kad ten prie vieškelio suaugo
 Tankus beržų miškas,
 Paliko tik tas pats dangus.
 O aš tenai prie griovio kranto
 Basomis kojomis liečiau žoles
 Ir ten verkiau nuo stogo varovančių
 Lašų sulyto mažo, juodo špoko.
 Tenai mes laidojom senolį mano.
 Tuo pačiu vieškeliu mes nulydėjom jį mirtin.
 Kapų koplyčioje ten gaudė varpas,
 Ir laikas skaitė ten senus sukrypusius kryžius.
 Tuo vieškeliu, kuris paraistėmis ir pamiškėm nueina,
 Nubrido mano protėvių karta į kartą,
 Nubrido jie liūnuotais rudeniais
 Supilkusiu gyvenimu į mirtį.
 Ir aš šiandieną parėjau į tėviškę
 Atsiminimų akmenėliais iškrjstu taku.
 Pasižiūrėti liūno vandeny atspindusio dangaus
 Aš parėjau ilgiausioje kelionėje namo.*

Implications of the epistolary genre may instigate associations with the narrative form, and this may be one of the reasons which led Antanaitis to read Paškevičiūtė's poetry as "personal narratives." In this poem, however, the personal exists as an inseparable part of the collective. The speaker does not refer to specific people or the yearning she feels for those lost. She yearns for the things which comprise the essence of loss. The grief over the lost homeland that was subjected to the destructive power of sovietization invokes Viktorija Skrupskelytė's statement that "The situation of émigrés spotlighted certain features. One is characteristic of a poet's worldview or in general, a person's state of spirituality. An example of this aspect could be the attraction of the earth or the moment of homelessness" [13, 8].⁵

In Paškevičiūtė's poem, the description of the present condition is characterized by the absence of any markers of subjectivity, while the personal pronoun "I" is used in rendering the speaker's subjective experience of the past ("touched the grass, wept for the wet starling bird"). In describing the events related to family and nature, "I" merges into the collective "we" while, at the end of the poem, the speaker becomes a first-person "I." This suggests, as it were, that through the fantasy of visiting "home," i.e. touching the roots of birth, the connections that determine the speaker's sense of identity may be recovered. Fantasy also becomes a means to reach and touch an existential bond in "Return" by Alė Rūta:

*I wandered endlessly, –
Picked flowers to bring them back to you.
So long ago were you lost in a deluding darkness.*

*...
No flowers found,
Amidst an infinity of weeds,
Whatever have you shown to me,
In entirety – no, not so, not so . . .*

⁵ My translation from Lithuanian into English.

*Exhausted in my search of blossoms, song, intimacy,
In reverie, return I
To shed my sorrow in an embrace of you. [10, 347]⁶*

The link between the migrating subject and the lost homeland is signified by flowers, a symbol of love, perfection, and revival. This metaphoric network extends into darkness hovering over the paths of emigration, along which any hope of returning to the lost motherland shrinks to nothingness. What persist in the wanderer's vision are just weeds, weeds that should be understood as those that arose in the wake of war and foreign occupation, those that model the sown seeds of evil. The confrontation with evil brings fresh hues of reflection to inbred values that, in the context of war and the forced movement of people, acquire connotations of idealism. The internal dialogue with the homeland foregrounds not so much the suffering associated with homelessness but rather, highlights the essential difference in worldview experienced in

⁶ "Grižtu":

Ējau toli –
Priskint ziedu ir tau parnešt.
Klaidi tamsa, neberandu seniai tavęs.

Širdy – daina
Tarp klystkeliu ji nuaidēs.
Bet abejonēse
kas kryžiu laiminant uždēs?

Nēra ziedu,
O piktzoliu šimtu šimtai,
Kā rodei man,
O visa – ne, ne tai, ne tai . . .

Ir pavargau, ieškodama ziedu, dainos, žmogaus.
Grižtu mintim
Aš prie tavęs pravirkst ir prisiglaust.

the face of confrontation with new cultures and ideologies: "Whatever have you shown to me, / In entirety – no, not so, not so . . ."7.

The poem is from the first collection of poems "Be tavęs" (Without You), published in 1946 by Alė Rūta who, in the words of Antanaitis, was the first debutante of post-war émigré years while she was a war refugee in Germany [1, 425]. The collection naturally represents the essential existential states associated with the loss of homeland and all the dear ones that comprise the essence of loss. Upon reading the words of Leonas Miškinas, reviewer of Alė Rūta's first poetry collection, however, the situation becomes discomfoting. Miškinas writes: "The poems bring to mind wilted flowers, painstakingly gathered and pressed in a young woman's album, which once brought out in the open, seem tragicomically sentimental and pointless"⁸ [cited in: 1, 426]. The bringing out into the open, what I would like to state as being, the unethical criticism by Miškinis that Antanaitis chose to cite, invokes another association of women's poetry. This reminds us of Cora Kaplan's ironical statement that female creativity is overshadowed by prescriptive androcentric "categories according to which female feeling and thought are, by definition, incapable of being translated into the highest art" [6, 17]. Antanaitis's account of later poetry by Alė Rūta may illustrate such an argument: "Not much could be stated any better about her later poetry following rather strong achievements and awards in prose, the little collections [use of the diminutive form] of poetry by Alė Rūta, "Gyvenimo lašai" (Droplets of Life, 1964) and "Diena šviesi" (A Bright Day, 1983) [1, 425].⁹ Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that conversely, Alė Rūta is presented by Alina Staknienė as a most productive writer of a realistic stroke, who has appeared in several genres. She has made herself most widely known in fiction and the domestic novel, in particular [14, 548].

Naturally, the lines about essential existential states relevant to the émigré situation flowed from the writer Alė Rūta in poetic forms tinged with subjective perceptions. Again, gender sensitivity is set aside in an effort to explain the negative criticism by Miškinas and Antanaitis. Calling for attention is that in her poems, Alė Rūta attempts to remain as close as possible to the object being visualized. The desire is to elicit surrounding details in the way they remain as they

⁷ "Ką rodei man, / O visa – ne, ne tai, ne tai . . ."

⁸ My translation from Lithuanian into English.

⁹ My translation from Lithuanian into English.

were in the past. The poetic purpose is to create a sphere in which the self can unite with all that has been lost. The poems do not strive for metaphoric embellishments which might only lengthen distance or actually sever the link between the visualized object and its discursive representation.

Thus the stylistics of Alė Rūta's poetry usually spring from imageries of the homeland's natural landscape. These are often juxtaposed with an elegized mood embodying perceptions about the wanderings of emigration and their figurative expressions. Similar stylistic tendencies appear not only in the three poetry collections by Alė Rūta that Antanaitis names but also in the fourth poetry collection dedicated to her son who had been killed in an accident, "Tyloj kalbėsi" (You Will Converse in the Silence, 2002). Even the subtitle of this work is named "Elegies of thoughts for my son Arimantas." Unquestionably, reverberating in this collection, as in her previous poetry, is the theme of loss. Overall, the stylistic representation here is reminiscent of the proposal by Viktorija Skrupskelytė that émigré poetry "can be described by this sort of simple, unpretentious formula: a poem expresses that which the heart feels; the feeling assumes specificity when it flows into a scenery of nature or some other fragment of the world observed" [13, 10].¹⁰ Besides, encounters with multidimensional realities of exile frequently mark an expression of subjective feelings and the transformations of identity that follow.

Worldview, that is, by extension, an identity realignment with regard to memory and place is also central in Danutė Paškevičiūtė's poetry. Here again the metaphoric network is largely grounded in imagery that signifies juxtapositions between the homeland and its loss. The concept of home elicits an entire complex of images pertinent to the homeland farmstead, a collective way of being and, frequently, a harmonious relationship with nature. Often the signification of home is encoded in concrete diction that is endowed with archetypal meaning. Archetypal aspects provide images related to home with the idea about an archaic past. This particular meaning of home, as an unalterable mythical space, contains a Romantic element. Neither the past nor the archetypal symbols are subjected to any revision. On the contrary, any deviation from what is associated as tradition is considered a violation of the previous order and its inherent security. The poetry of Danutė Paškevičiūtė, just as that of Alė Rūta, attempts at times to delineate a discursive negotiation between new cultures and their con-

¹⁰ My translation from Lithuanian into English.

sequent identities. What often overshadows such a negotiation is the feeling of alienation created by socio-political and cultural realities that intervene in ascertaining links between the locale to which the destiny of an émigré leads and identity. For both poets, homeland frequently remains as just an emotional and conceptual notion. In moments of despair, when new experiences begin to cloud the vision of the birthplace, the wandering poetic personae in search of the lost integrity between place and identity becomes overcome by hopelessness and anxiety. The speaker in "Fingers of Anxiety" [8, 59–60],¹¹ just as in the poem "Why Travel" [ibid., 55], perceives anxiety as identical with the "I": "Why travel / If I cannot escape myself."¹² By comparison, the poem "Homeland Lost" by Alė Rūta depicts exile as an impasse and an irretrievable identity crisis:

*My travel reached the end of roads,
You are not there.*

*When birds return and lilacs bloom,
You are not there. –
In the enclosure of hopelessness and despair, –
There you are not. [10, 346]¹³*

In the oxymoronic juxtaposition of the dynamism of nature and the invariance related to the state of despair experienced in exile, there can be traced an alignment of moods in nature typical of the Romantic poetry. The anaphoric repetition "You are not there" and the inversion of the anaphoric structure points to attempts to reestablish the link with the lost. In the poem "Spring" by Alė Rūta

¹⁰ "Nerimo pirštai."

¹² "Ir kam keliauti": "Ir kam gi man keliauti, / Jei nuo savęs / Vistiek pabėgti negaliu."

¹³ "Be tėvynės":

*Visi keliai kelionėj baigės,
Tavęs nėra.*

*Ir paukščiai grįžta ir alyvos žydi,
Tavęs nėra. –
Tik neviltis, tik skausmas lydi, –
nėra Tavęs.*

the loss is embodied in an acoustic image of moaning "under blood stained snow" [11, 68].¹⁴

The authoritative, if not gender biased criticism, has placed Lithuanian émigré poets Danutė Paškevičiūtė and Alė Rūta on the margins of the literary tradition. Because the problematic issues of émigré life have remained important in national consciousness, it also remains important to appraise and review the surviving expressions of these problems and their criticisms. It would have been desirable if the aforementioned article had also deliberated the actual poetry by Danutė Paškevičiūtė and Alė Rūta, which suffered such explicitly harsh criticism. It seems relevant to mention that one of the critics, Leonas Miškinas, which is a pen name for Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, is now a recognized Lithuanian poet. Another critic, who is the author of a solid portion of "Lithuanian émigré Literature, 1945–1990", according to "Lietuvių Enciklopedija" (Encyclopedia of Lithuanians) "earned a bachelor's degree in commerce from Chicago's de Paul University in 1957. He writes on literary topics, particularly book reviews, broadly in Lithuanian periodicals, such as *Aidas*, *Metmenys*, *Varpas*, *Margutis* and others" [16, 40].¹⁵ Although there is no desire to diminish the contribution of this prolific critic to the development of the Lithuanian (diasporic) literary tradition, one thought cannot be laid to rest. Based on the evaluations of the poetry by Danutė Paškevičiūtė and Alė Rūta in a work as significant as "Lithuanian émigré Literature", the correlation of gender and power factors seems directly to determine the relationship with literary tradition. A recuperative reading of the poetry by these two Lithuanian émigré women writers has been aimed to prove that their poetry deserves to be remembered as émigré envisages that meld into literary tradition. It would be desirable that such imagination were not treated as the relationship of the "Other" with the creative and evaluative subject, but rather, as the self-expression of subjective experiences by women independent of prescriptive discursive forms.

¹⁴ "Pavasari": "po sniegu kruvinu vaitos."

¹⁵ My translation from Lithuanian into English.

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Irēna Ragaišiene
**Danutes Paškevičutes un Ales Rūtas dzeja : emigrācijā
rakstīto darbu un literatūras tradīcijas krustpunkti**

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā atsegts esamības semantiskais spektrs lietuviešu trimdas dzejnieču Danutes Paškevičutes un Ales Rūtas daiļradē, diskursīvā subjektivitātes un pašapziņas izteiksme dzejā. Akcentēts, ka lietuviešu trimdas literatūrkritikā vienādi asi kritizētā abu dzejnieču daiļrade jāinterpretē kā tāds trimdinieka skatījums, kas organiski iederas literatūras tradīcijā – šāds skatījums jāvērtē nevis kā "cita" attiecības ar radošo un vērtējošo subjektu, bet gan kā sievietes subjektīvās pieredzes konkrēta pašizpaušme, ko neierobežo iepriekšnoteiktas, kano-niskas diskursa formas.