



## **Children's Literature as a Political Minority's Means of Resistance (or the Lithuanian Literary Fairy Tales of the 1970s and the 1980s)**

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**Abstract:** The history of Lithuanian children's literature is not long, and the period of its most intensive development was in 1918-1940 (the years of Lithuania's first independence). Writers of that time treated children's literature as a means to familiarise children with nature and, generally, with the external world, as an educational and character-building tool. The writers were also concerned with nurturing children's love for their homeland, and patriotism was one and, perhaps, the only aspect of the civic and political content in children's literature.

**Key words:** Lithuanian children's literature, literary fairy tale, allegory, resistance.

In 1940, Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union, thus becoming a political minority. The natural course of literature and art was interrupted, if not halted altogether. Throughout the first post-war decade children's literature was used as an instrument to propagate communist ideology, while national and patriotic feelings were out of the question. Only after the year 1956, psychologism, lyricism and expression of subjectivity re-appeared, gaining ever stronger presence in literature. Children's literature started to convey children's real emotional experience, works of all genres increasingly showed more elements of play and comic effects.

One can hypothesize that during the entire Soviet occupation period (1940-1990) children's literature in Lithuania was relatively freer than the literature created for adults.

“The history of Soviet Lithuanian literature could be written as the history of fighting against censorship, efforts to circumvent and outwit it, as the history of overcoming the inner censor by each writer”, says a famous historian of Lithuanian literature (Kubilius, 1992: 101). Of course, children's literature was also censored and controlled, but the ideas expressed in it could be hidden under the traditional and seemingly “innocent” form of a fairy tale.

Opposition to the Soviet totalitarian system in Lithuania became more active in the 1970s, especially after 1972. New ideas in literature were expressed indirectly, in allegoric images and the language of metaphors, grotesque became a particularly relevant



comic form. All genres, and especially poetry for adults, showed signs of modernization and renewal. “It is universally acknowledged that one of the sources that gave inspiration to the modernization and renewal of poetry at that time was folklore” (Kmita, 2009: 140). Children's literature (poetry, drama and prose) also drew on folklore. It was certainly not the first time that folklore was used as a resource, but this time differently – it was originally interpreted rather than just simply re-told or stylized. It means that the motifs and images of folk tales, legends and songs were used to render new ideas.

So, children's literature which several decades ago served as a vehicle of Soviet ideological propaganda was gradually turning into the platform for subversive ideas. I will discuss three significant works of children's literature of the time where ideas of civic and political rebellion are much more clearly expressed than in adult literature. Formally, the three books belong to the system of children's literature, the genre of a literary fairy tale and have the length of a novella or a novel. It should also be noted that all of them were written by the officially recognized authors, representative names of Soviet literature. One of them, Eduardas Mieželaitis (1919-1997), had even received the highest award in the Soviet Union – the Lenin Prize (1962).

In his book *A Tale of the Forest* (1981), Eduardas Mieželaitis portrays nature, the world of a forest. The action takes place in the country, called *Nebutija* (“non-existence land”), where joy is forbidden, and from which the Diamond Bell that used to spread joy has been stolen. The main protagonist is a boy made of wood, a kind of Pinocchio – he represents the child and his nature. However, the similarity to the well-known Pinocchio of Collodi is superficial. The story emphasizes the mythical origin of the wooden kid. He is the son of a woman (a young recluse living in a forest hut) and a mythical creature, the Spirit of the Forest. Like in folk tales, the protagonist is small but very strong, he uses his super-natural powers to defend the wronged ones. He is a kind-hearted optimist, engaged in the activities similar to those of other folk heroes: he takes care of hares, plays the magic pipe and gets a magic wand as a present. In this book, the author creatively uses elements of various folk genres: motifs of fairy tales and myths, magic objects, proverbs, paraphrases of folk songs, etc. The wooden kid lifts the Bell of Joy from the bottom of



the earth and banishes fear and sadness from his country. However, his main task is to free his mother from captivity, who is locked up in the castle tower of Kingstown. To achieve this purpose, the hero releases the Storm-Woman, fastened in golden chains to the Eternal Oak. The Storm-Woman destroys the tower of the prison-castle, and the boy sets eyes on his mother again. “Her gait was somewhat tired, her face lined with wrinkles of sorrow, her hair gone grey. But she walked with her head raised high, her posture very straight – like the Truth itself”.

Truth, Freedom, Revolution and Resistance are the main concepts stressed in this work. Obviously, the writer intended this book not only for children. The tale is preceded by a long, rather philosophical prologue, densely packed with international words, cultural references which can be understood only by adults. Due to the ambivalence of the addressee, the book had limited success. The highly intellectual prologue of the book prevented the child-reader from reaching the essentially simple and dynamic beginning of the story and meeting with its charming and childish hero.

The book *Beyond the Locked Door* (1978) by Kazys Saja has a typical fantasy-genre structure: the primary and the secondary worlds are strictly separated. The teenager from the modern school world enters the wonderland in the past. The narrative of the past mentions serfdom, recruits and other historical references, but the historical time is not described in full detail; the author primarily seeks to convey a generalized picture of the place and time. The central arena of action is the Court of Princess Felicia. The thirteen-year-old John becomes the hero of the fairy tale, now called Shwips. He wishes to gain access to the palace in order to find out the fate of his father. Once invited to the palace, the boy's father told the King the truth, which caused him drop dead, meanwhile the father himself disappeared. One motif, which recurs in fairy tales of many nations, is very important here – the one who will make the princess laugh, will receive half the kingdom. All contenders for the prize (including Shwips, although his aim is quite different) first have to join the Jokers' School run by the witch Melanie. Here they learn to be hypocrites and liars, master the skills of trickery and flattery – much needed in the court. Princess Felicia manipulates people, rules the country by deceiving her subjects and holding them



in fear. The Court shown in the fairy tale is the allegory of the totalitarian system. The craving for power and money, self-humiliation, meanness of spirit are criticized in the book. It is noteworthy that positive moral values are preserved by the heroes of the popular Lithuanian folk tales – the orphan Sigutė, the court cook Barbara and, of course, Shwips himself, who stays immune to the power-and-money infection. In one episode, while Princess Felicia is away, the management of the Court is entrusted to the cook Barbara – an ironic allusion to the notorious statement by Lenin, the founder of communism, that every cook can govern the communist state...

In his book *Matthew of Clay: King of People* (1978), the writer Vytautas Petkevičius (1930-2008) mentions such historical place names as Voruta and Pilėnai. The action is set in the occupied country *Duonuva*, which sounds very similar to *Lietuva* (Lithuania). The protagonist's name is of folk origin, associated with a Lithuanian idiom. This character is made from clay by the potter's widow Barbara. The feelings of love, pity, sympathy and grievance revive the clay figure, turning it into a man. The first word he utters is “slave”, and it is addressed to the invader's henchman, the governor, who collects taxes and humiliates his mother. The reader is soon aware that the story is a parable and that the history of this country is analogous to that of Lithuania. It is the story of occupations. Petkevičius, more overtly than the other two authors, defines the condition of Lithuania at the time as occupation, ingenuously explaining its mechanism. Moreover, the writer indirectly predicts the problems that the country will face after it liberates itself from the invaders. Elected as King, Matthew of Clay realizes that to rule the country is no easy task and that Truth without Love does not work and can even be cruel. Upon finding his father imprisoned by the invaders, Matthew tells him straight that the mother has been burnt. Shocked by the truth, the father dies of a heart attack.

Analyzing these books from a time perspective, one is surprised by how many similarities and common features (artistic devices, twists of plot, ideas) they share. Firstly, the three authors make use of folklore, traditional images and names (Some names of characters recur from one book to another). Despite the fact that the protagonists in the three books are of different ages – a child, a teenager and a young man



– they all have character traits typical of folk heroes: generosity, indifference to material possessions, altruism, optimism and supernatural powers. Secondly, all protagonists set out in search of their mother or father, with the purpose to free them or learn their fate. Thirdly, the imaginary countries created in the three books are strongly reminiscent of Lithuania – in their landscape, nature and historical references. In the opinion of the professor of children's literature Vincas Auryla (1923-2009), the attempts “to portray an allegoric world of despotic rulers and oppressed masses” is one of the key strategies to express new ideas (Auryla, 1995: 179). The three works bring out the relevance of such concepts as Truth, Love, Happiness, Resistance, Sacrifice, etc. The concept of Freedom is explored with more caution.

There seems to be only one way to explain these similarities – the universally perceived drama of political subjection and the shared ideological attitudes of the three writers. Obviously, it has to be admitted that ideas that could not be openly articulated in adults' literature could be fairly clearly communicated, through Aesopian language, in children's literature. It is natural that, with these and other works, the concept of dual addressee or cross writing became established in Lithuanian children's literature.

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