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## Destiny and Disinheritance of Liminal *Genius Loci*

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### Судьба и лишение наследия ЛИМИНАЛЬНОГО ГЕНИЯ МЕСТА

*In the final analysis, however, there is no hierarchy between the legendary and the real, in the context of your city at least, since the present engenders the past far more energetically than the other way round.*

*Joseph Brodsky, A PLACE AS GOOD AS ANY, p. 39*

*And now nine years of mighty Zeus have gone by, and the timbers of our ships have rotten away and the cables are broken and far away our own wives and our young children are sitting within our halls and wait for us, while still our work here stays forever unfinished as it is, for whose sake we came hither.*

*THE ILIAD, 2.134–138*

В статье лектора ЕГУ Натальи Михайловой раскрывается авторское представление о возможности осмысления нарратива «гения места» в рамках иерархической парадигмы (ре)конструкции и (вос)создания наследия. На примере лиминального «гения места» двух городов, Вильнюса и Фрайбурга, дискуссионной представляется проблема реконцептуализации непереводаемого «гения места», населяющего места и эпохи во времена катастрофических процессов в обществе.

Eleven years ago, on February 20th in 2011, I was sitting at 11 am in a big overfilled movie hall of Berlinale to watch the last (not the latest but indeed the last) film of Béla Tarr. It was the tenth movie for me at that festival, it was Sunday morning, so – knowing and loving Béla Tarr's films – I equipped myself with coffee. Expecting a viewing of an arthouse film, I was not ready for the overwhelming experience this artwork submerged me into. The darkness and quietness of the cinematic shots, the cosmic sound of a catastrophic wind, the subdued colours of the world reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *THE ROAD*, the contemplative and austere scenes – *TURIN'S HORSE* mesmerized me and

made it hard to endure the metaphysical depths yawning from under its visual surface. I was slipping in and out of an altogether different dimension, a non-place whose *genius loci* swept me with the gale-force wind of an existential desert.

The film portrays this non-place with minimalistic means raising the symbolism to the universally relevant conditions. The woman's repeated gentle pleading with the horse to drink and eat remains ineffective, while the sheer immobility and inward quietness of the animal as if it is 'not-there' is uncanny. The isolated niche of their home is underscored acoustically each time the door is suddenly opened or closed by the fury of the stormy wind – the outside world uncaringly and violently puncturing the silence of their empty home. This overwhelming violence of the storm outside made me wonder: "In what apocalyptic and far away landscape did the film director find this surreal scenery?" Turns out – surprisingly and fittingly – in Hungary.

The flapping folds of their clothing during the Sisyphean struggle to fetch water outside from a drying well, the laconic shots of the dining table with just two glasses and a meagre bowl of potatoes, the two figures despondently not even touching their only sustenance, – the film creates despondency and forebodes an end to the world as it is known. As becomes evident from the daughter's questions and the father's answers, they remain unknowing to the reasons of apocalyptic darkening down of the world, why things are getting disjointed. Unreflecting, they submit themselves to everyday repetition of life routine, the monotony of their human condition, the everyday recurrence of the same, without obvious meaning and direction or hope for anything beyond that. Their everyday ascetic and meagre lives, trying to leave and not being able to, not knowing where they are and where they can go – everything indicates the world going down, the narrative getting lost, the *genius loci* of the world aghast at our expectations of something definitive to be decided for us, and the movie ending – akin to life – completely unexpectedly and unresolved.

How often do our requests for meaning and hopes turning to some past or tradition, yearning for answers and signposts, are reciprocated with mere silence and 'not-there-ness'? Are we looking for a narrative that might not be there, meaning that cannot be grasped, essence that cannot be captured and rationalized? Do we at times impose our hierarchy of today's agenda on the ephemeral heritage transpiring through the ruins, archives, texts?

As Joseph Brodsky pointedly describes our relationship with the past, "the present engenders the past far more energetically than the other way round" [1, 39]. More often than not, our story with heritage is rather the one of disinheritance, of a broken link with it and our being destined to continuously (re)construct and (re)create the meanings. Remarkably, this is what the film communicates to the viewer who expects a narrative having an explanation and leading to a resolution. According to Jacques Rancière, Béla Tarr's movies are always "the story of a broken promise, of a voyage that returns to its point of departure" where "no explanation is worth anything anymore" [4, 4].

Perhaps our reconceptualizations of heritage are exactly this event of a voyage that tries to return to a point of departure, looking for a story, with promises for a meaning and answers that could be relevant and applicable today. This is why the catastrophic *genius loci* of a non-place in the film embodies perfectly the absence of unifying narratives in any one single place or even nation today. I posit that this non-place with the gale force of the catastrophic *genius loci* is the broken promise of a community, of a livable world together, with shared meanings and meaningful explanations that can lead us out of the crisis.

In this situation, our predicament seems to be the one where *genii loci* of places do not speak to us because we do not create explorative space for them to resonate with us, and we are not much different from a traveller Joseph Brodsky describes in his essay A PLACE AS GOOD AS ANY who is hungry for details, is ready to



“digest legends as eagerly as reality” and does not experience wonder upon seeing “medieval ramparts as intended background for some steel-cum-glass-cum-concrete structures: a university, say, or more likely an insurance company headquarters. These are usually erected on the site of some monastery or ghetto bombed out of existence in the course of the last war” [1, 39].

Indeed, the ruminations you are reading right now are being written exactly from such a university, housed in a monastery. It may very well be that Brodsky was inspired to write this essay during his time in Vilnius – the city on the edge of empires, at the crossroads, whose *genius loci* has for centuries been nourished by exiles and emigres, travellers and conquerors, victims of persecution and heroes of revolutionary insubordination. There are many such liminal cities that nourish and give abode – do they have a specific *genius loci* that attracts exiles and can be decoded, or do exiles, fleeing from the catastrophic *genii loci* of their homes, create a liminal *genius loci* of a place that, in turn, temporarily gives them nurturing space and rescue, forever marking subsequent generations?

It is in this promise of escape from a catastrophic *genius loci* haunting the tsarist imperium that many Belarusian Jews fled, leaving an indelible imprint and creating the *genius loci* of their new place. Projected onto the outskirts of the empire which usually expels with centrifugal force all elements chosen as foreign to its oppressive essence, they were driven by an impetus to act in significant ways thus creating a liminal *genius loci* elsewhere. Two cities connect such Belarusian exiles, Vilnius and Freiburg i. Breisgau – two cities on the edge of empires, beset with many tug of war conflicts by superpowers claiming dominance. In 1912, Freiburg attracted Zalman Schazar (born as Schneiur Salman Rubaschow in 1889 near Minsk) who came there after surviving arrests in Vilnius in 1907. Zalman studied in Freiburg philosophy for three semesters and in 1924 emigrated to Palestine, where he authored essays, scientific and journalistic texts, becoming Minister of Education and later serving for ten years as the third president of Israel in 1963–1973.

Zemach Shabad’s niece Rosa Schabad-Gawronskaja came to the University of Freiburg from Vilnius to study medicine and received there her



PhD degree in 1908. Together with her husband Jakov Gavronski, she led the Freiburg group of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. After her return to the Russian empire and arrests, she later saved many lives in Vilnius ghetto that was created by wehrmacht of Nazi Germany. Rosa founded in the ghetto a school, an orphanage and organized medical treatment for children.

Another notable woman, Sara Rabinowitsch, born in Berezino in 1880, defended her PhD degree in Freiburg writing about the General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia. Together with Bertha Pappenheim (known as the famous Freud's case of "patient Anna O."), Sara co-authored in 1904 a study on conditions of trafficking in women in Galicia "Zur Lage der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Galizien. Reise-Eindrücke und Vorschläge zur Besserung der Verhältnisse" [2, 133–137].

What was it about Freiburg's *genius loci* that attracted these refugees and notable personalities? Undoubtedly, the turn of the century was an intellectually intensive period in Freiburg, with many émigrés either finding solace and curative abode, or studying and creating, or continuing their struggle with the catastrophic *genius*

*loci* of their home. Among these notable figures were Fyodor Stepun, Dmitri Merezhkovsky with Zinaida Gippius, Marina Tsvetayeva, Dmytro Chyzhevsky, Alexander Kresling. Freiburg was the place where Hans-Georg Gadamer together with Fyodor Stepun attended lectures of Edmund Husserl, it was the city where programmatic ideas of neo-kantianism were developed by Heinrich Rickert and his circle. It was also the place where the first international philosophy journal LOGOS was established in 1909 with participation from Fyodor Stepun, educator Sergei Gessen and philosopher Nikolai von Bubnoff.

With both Vilnius and Freiburg, it is not feasible to pinpoint or locate their *genius loci*, verbally arousing it to life with a concrete label and explanations of their specificity. Similar to Brodsky's reversal of the hierarchy where it is the present that engenders the past, perhaps the hierarchical paradigm of turning to a *genius loci* of historical heritage that we can make use or sense of, needs reconceptualization. According to Rancière, "it is not individuals who live in places and make use of things. It is the things that first come to them, that surround, penetrate, or reject them" (Rancière 27). Echoing his vision of places and

things, one can speak of a *genius loci* that permeates the place and happens to its liminal inhabitants, the conversation between the catastrophic *genius loci* of their past and the liminal *genius loci* of their present happening through these individuals, akin to the wind passing through the lyre thus creating a melody. In most cases, it happens without us being aware, without us deciding the process – the untranslatable inexplicable *genius loci* that inhabits places from epoch to epoch, permeating the atmosphere and encoding each subsequent experience into the sediment of heritage originating from those passing through. This heritage happens to us and lives through us in its truest full-fledged form with perpetual interpretations and modifications. While we concern ourselves with preserving, locating and defining the heritage – the *genius loci* of the heritage inevitably permeate the place and happens to us, underlining the perpetual delayed expression and interpretation of the event, fact, source or story.

In this context, it is important to remember the operation of collective undoing and demise that is at work in the film of Bela Tarr and that is strangely reminiscent of the Iliad where the saga culminates in the destruction of Troy. Both *TURIN'S HORSE* and the Iliad clearly designate this event as an apocalypse. The Iliad suggests many Trojans as examples of recklessness and arrogance, showing how the whole city, from the perspective of a community, has offended the gods and will be destroyed. If apocalypse can be envisioned and defined as a wrathful mass destruction of mortals who have committed offense against the gods, then humans' inability to remain alert to and heed insistent and unheard demands of their epoch's *genius loci* is also at play both in the film and the human condition of our times. When cooperation breaks down, when community is non-existent, where common values are not at work, when communication between the people is dysfunctional, social life too comes to an end, leaving us with the apocalyptic *genius loci* of the world which we seem to be destined to inherit.

#### Cited sources

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