

Contemporary Lithuanian Literature between the Western and Eastern European Tradition

The discussion about the place and time of origin of contemporary Lithuanian literature has been taking place in Lithuanian culture and literature for about a century. It began in the period of the first Lithuanian independence and has not yet come to a stop to this day. One of the first initiators of this discussion – the authoritative Lithuanian modernist Kazys Binkis (1893–1942) – had called the patriarch of Lithuanian poetry, Maironis (*real name* Jonas Mačiulis (1896–1932), to an ideological duel. Discussion began with bitter poetic lines proposing to kick Maironis’ poetry aside and accept the challenges of the art of the modernist epoch. “Enough to sweeten the hearts / And to the sore places / Lay the packages of compromises“ (Binkis 1955: 72), told Binkis in a poem “Salem Aleikum”. It seemed important for Binkis and his followers to participate in the movement of modern European art, to respond to its challenges, and we couldn’t say that they were not successful. Maironis the Lithuanian patriarch almost did not participate in that discussion, just in several poems a sore state of an unappreciated poet is felt. Maironis felt his position in Lithuanian literature, so he did not argued with the young. Maironis’ lyrics yesterday and today are perceived without dispute as a code of contemporary poetry, a category of classics.

Binkis’ position was supported by a poet, dramatist, reviewer Balys Sruoga (1896–1947) who continually critically disputed not against the outworn or conservative form of Maironis’ poems but more against the content. Sruoga was puzzled by the fact that by filling and re-releasing the same-named selection of poems (“Spring voices” 1895) for twenty five years he gained an uncountable number of followers and worshippers: “Listen to the arguments of young schoolgirls or speeches of old intellectuals – you will certainly

hear the name of Maironis and compliments to him. Read the editorial office answers to young poets – and they will suggest you read verses of Vaičaitis and Maironis... Note the jingle of a villager in the evening dusk – you will mostly hear Maironis' lyrics". (Sruoga 2001: 34). And although Sruoga likened his and Binkis' generation's posture towards Maironis' works to the unfolding of the spirit of the nation, Sruoga rated that spirit only as an argument of national regeneration. Sruoga was sure that Maironis' lyrics cannot sound so moving to an educated intellectual.

Binkis' posture was maintained by Binkis' generation which was starving for a lively literary life, city and civilization; it wrote manifestos, articles, published magazines, wrote works in which the movement of chrestomathic art of avant-garde of the-then Europe is recognized. Maironis stood for the static conservatism and outworn idealism for that generation. And we cannot say they were not successful. Lithuanian literary life brightened, gained a status of process. But it is exactly the romantic idealism of Maironis' creation, even conservatism that was probably the only engine of such a process. Lithuanian symbolist Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, an apprentice of Maironis' poetical school, came back to that discussion after a while. He defended the value and standing of classics in the culture of a little country.

Lithuanian exodus poet Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas (born 1919) estimated this process in s perspective of at least six decades and wrote: "Each new literary movement considered it a sanctity to begin its campaign by the ritual dissociation from Maironis." (Nyka-Niliūnas 1996: 4–5) Maybe we can look at this endless discussion from a wider perspective. It would be difficult today to find a researcher of literature or a philosopher who has not touched upon Maironis' phenomenon in some way. Is it determined by repetitive events of regeneration of Lithuania or maybe by more difficult intellectual motives intended to conceptualize the spirit of the nation, the structure of mentality. Maybe that spirit found a clarification in the cultural life of Lithuanians in the form of realistic representation, or maybe it testifies to a hellish jam of Lithuanians, because names of talented creators – Binkis and Sruoga – are rarely mentioned. The

famous researcher of Maironis's phenomenon Vanda Zaborskaitė has said:

The meaning and standing of Maironis in Lithuanian literature was realised not at once. A perspective was needed not only to overlook the entirety of his creation but also to recognize the content and direction of whole literature. Of course the objectivity of decisions was conditioned by the literary and social attitude of estimators, and the methodology of researchers. The history of Maironis' evaluation reflects many substantial shifts of literary critics and science of Lithuanians.

(Zaborskaitė 1987: 408)

Those shifts are earnestly self-analyzed only in the most recent years, and relatively gingerly, because the literary historiographic clichés and habits of thinking are to be recognized, not only achievements.

The Soviet time hindered that spontaneous discussion, and only in about the 1970s there arose such figures like Just. Marcinkevičius (b. 1930; an adherent of Maironis' classicism), E. Miežėlaitis (1909–2005; a lover of pre-war avant-garde), A. Žukauskas (1912–1985; an initiator of etnolinguistic experiments), and subsequently, M. Martinitis (b. 1936), T. Venclova (b. 1937), J. Vaičiūnaitė (1937–2001), S. Geda (1943–2008). Naturally, Lithuanian literary diaspora splits into two parts in a tumble of post-war political upheavals, but the exodus literature had its own relations with Maironis' poetry: the representatives of Lithuanian existentialism had already graduated from Maironis' school by their neo-romantic poetic experiments and wanted to discover something more adequate for their generation, and a big part of epigones, left without education, remained not leaving the orbit of a classic and not creating anything distinctive. So we could think of Maironis' influence on Bernardas Brazdžionis' (1907–2002) and Kazys Bradūnas' (1907–2009). Yet Maironis remained more topical in Lithuania through his centripetal power. It is difficult to trace the connection of classics and avant-garde in their work because the Soviet environment did not provide chances to art programs or manifestos. We could claim that contemporary Lithuanian literature returned through the back door in the Soviet

period while the official criticism looked after the utopian schemes of socialistic realism.

Today the discussion of a similar complexity cannot be either that acute or topical, but is substituted by other topical questions of a lively literary process. Meanwhile the question of the development of modernism in Lithuanian literature remains unanswered and topical to researchers. And it involves not only the spectrum of literature, culture and art, but transfers to the space of literary theory, translation and evaluation. On the one hand, it is questioned whether the development of culture and literature in Lithuania is genuine and original, on the other hand, are we constantly only running after the West? On the one hand, the orientation and competence of the Lithuanian literary orientation towards the West is questioned, on the other, it is realized that the core of literature is its distinction.

The followers of Greimas' semiotics, like Kęstutis Nastopka, Saulius Žukas, Dalia Satkauskytė, Nijolė Keršytė, Dainius Vaitiekūnas have implanted the Western competence mainly by translations of French researches of literature, culture and art, distancing themselves from the figures and methods of literary criticism of the Soviet time. However, in the mainstream of researchers of semiotics, the works of the Estonian-Russian Yuri Lotman and the French-Lithuanian Algirdas Julius Greimas have had a great impact. Our specialists of semiotics met the new independence having a clear methodological school and creditable perspectives of development. Today this perspective can be associated with Greimas' centre in Vilnius University and a quite emphatically defined tradition of semiotic science. Not everyone can master it, that's why Lithuanian researchers of semiotics feel pretty proud. But this pride, vouching for a feeling of prestige and rallying a sort of ordained-to-science circle, does not grant a growth of the number of semiotic researchers in a wider environment of Lithuanian literary science. There are some doubts about its full-valued continuity.

The sharpest distinction in contemporary Lithuanian literary science lies between Lithuanian leading figures of semiotics and the sensual, subjective phenomenological literary school, which spontaneously matured in the Soviet period without theoretical programs and manifestos. The best known representative of Lithuanian

phenomenology is Viktorija Daujotytė, professor of Lithuanian literature at Vilnius University. In 2003 she published a study called “Literary phenomenology”. She has published more than fourteen major works since 2001, and their dominant mark is immanent analysis of writing. Rita Tūtlytė, an associate professor of Lithuanian literature at Vilnius University, distinguishes a subtler model of literary criticism practiced in the Soviet period from a vulgar sociological monolith. Reviewing the texts, written in the Soviet period, of Vanda Zaborskaitė, Vytautas Kubilius, Donatas Sauka, Viktorija Daujotytė, Kęstutis Nastopka, Albertas Zalatorius and even the philosopher Arvydas Šliogeris, she finds symptomatically recurrent names of the German and Swiss tradition – E. Staigner, M. Heidegger, W. Kayser, L. Spitzer (Tūtlytė 2000: 19). German texts reached the Lithuanian literary researchers easier because of tighter connections with Germany. As for the position of Lithuanians, one could get confused, for example in the case of an eminent American researcher of Russian literature, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, because Šilbajoris successfully combined semiotics, the New and immanent critics in his works.

Thus, polemic tension is present between Lithuanian researchers of semiotics and phenomenology. It has to do more with the political sphere of influence than with an open discussion. Both poles would desire to consolidate their power over institutions neighbouring academic spheres (universities, ministry, the content of school manuals). It is in turn sometimes hard for a reader not involved with the French semiotic school to understand the semiotic vocabulary. Lithuanian figures of semiotics, with their competence in the field, are truly equal participants of a European theoretical discussion. On the other hand, their opponents are very much appreciated by the Lithuanian reader. Being genuine and authentic at the same time, they do not publish their works in international journals, but rather limit themselves to discussions among their followers in Lithuania. The leading role here is once again performed by the authority of Viktorija Daujotytė, her very forcible style and capacity of intuitively developing a school of her apprentices. According to the most rational contemporary Lithuanian literary theoretician Aušra Jurgutienė, such intuitive phenomenological research had its roots in

Soviet literary scholarship, the cultural-historic, humanistic and aesthetic tradition inherited from the interwar period (Jurgutienė 2006: 7). However, in the presence of a strong and vulgar sociological trend that tradition was levelled to psychological and emotional empathy, and it was not easy to rise to a higher theoretic level (ib.).

All questions about the origin of the discussions in Lithuanian literature lead us back to poetry, which was a dominant genre for a long time, or to poetic prose, excelling in the field of a good literature in the present day. Poetry means in the first place Maironis and only then, Binkis, because the Lithuanian reader would recognize not only his national character but also European individuality in Maironis' work. Binkis gave us the sensation of literary experiment, game and risk, but Maironis unfolded a deeper world-view, the Baltic spirit, Christian ideology. Indeed, his world-view is an offspring of late romanticism, yet it is precisely from Maironis' poetry that we perceive this world-view as an organic formation. By going deeper into the sources of such spirit and ideology we necessarily approach the original sources of Lithuanian culture: a world-view based on earth and nature (fecundity), the mythology and religion of the ancient Lithuanians. Virtually in relation with Maironis' poetry the foundations of the immanent and phenomenological school were laid.

When reflecting upon the ideology of national world-view and the dominant canon of Lithuanian literature, it is important to emphasize its earthly dimension: the ideology of earth, water, dying and regenerating nature. The matricentric image of the earth-mother dominates Lithuanian literature. The earth-mother is always full of fecund womb waters from which nature and human world is constantly resurrecting in Lithuanian poetry. This is a sensual Lithuanian lyric proto-world which was easiest to be explained by psychological empathy and recognition. Structural, semiotic analysis does not contradict it, but it introduces distance, logic, scepticism. It is topical in the work of the youngest Lithuanian poets. We can speak about the world of water, night, the dark and the earth, which according to the mythologists and researchers of religion, associates with the European origins. To quote Gintaras Beresnevičius: "It is a

quite easily graspable religious mythological base, and apparently we see that ancient Lithuanian religion and mythology are in the very centre of Europe; this array extends from Celtic / Germanic religious thinking to Iranian (Alan, Scythian), even Iran and India. The Lithuanian / Baltic religious system interjects between the Celtic / Germanic and Iranian ones as an intermediate link, but occupies centric rather than peripheral position on both aspects and transmits the Iranian-Caucasian influences to the Finno-Ugric (Estonian, Finnish, Mordvins) tribes. Practically the Lithuanian/Baltic mythological religious tradition is in the middle and this can be explained in two ways: either it is the most relict, or it is a node of an effective dialogue of religions. In other words, it has so much functions of intermediation either because there was no such communication while Lithuanian tradition and their ancestors simply kept the oldest peculiarities of Indo-European proto-religion and, accordingly, what Celts knew and what Iranians knew long before.“ (Beresnevičius 2008: 10).

Sure there are traces of god of fire, light, day and song (traces of masculine, late, patriarchal mentality) in Lithuanian literary self-awareness, yet there are more traces of passive, dark, feminine thinking, even to this day. And those signs are convenient for immanent critics in principle. Intuitive insights and psychological exploration favours a sensual dialogue with the reader. Meanwhile, the reader of Maironis has been exceptional for more than a century from a standpoint of the whole epoch: it is the whole nation. Maironis was the first to evoke the multi-layered past of the Lithuanian culture by his poetic images. It is beyond doubt that Maironis' Christian theology can be interpreted not only by traditional keys of neo-romanticism and realism, but also by the images of natural religions (Baltic, Veda). The outcome of our late Christianization is an incredibly contradictory world-view of the contemporary Lithuanians: catholic ceremonies become matched with ancient rituals and superstitious beliefs. The enthusiasts perform their ceremonies and propagate the old beliefs without much ado. They are often well-educated, talented artists and popular culture propagators, persons of the old (renewed but not genuine) belief. These phenomena sometimes would be hard to understand and could be ascribed to mass

culture. At the same time it is the formation of our elite culture, an outcome of long decades of reconstruction of inner content (when it was forbidden to do otherwise and it was as it was). It should be noted that the persecution of Christianity and limited freedom of belief during Soviet time highlighted the form and contents of the old Lithuanian religion. The movement of folklorists and researchers of national heritage all over Lithuania and the rally "Romuva" were among the most important factors sustaining the national Lithuanian self-awareness during the Soviet period.

The generation which was born at the beginning of the 1960s and the influential literary authorities of today (the poets D. Kajokas, N. Miliauskaitė, K. Platelis, G. Cieškaitė, O. Baliukonytė, the fiction writers R. Gavelis, A. Ramonas, V. Juknaitė) are very different and reflect their experience intellectually and creatively in different ways. They reflect religious and philosophical aspirations in the first place and are open to the ideas and practices of Eastern religions. In fact Maironis was the forerunner also in this sense. Not only older writers, like V. Bložė took interest in Buddhism and Zen, but also the subtle lyrical poet N. Miliauskaitė, the contemporary favorite of the youth A. Marčėnas, as well as Geda, L. Gutauskas and G. Cieškaitė have explored the beginnings of the Lithuanian myth, founding links with cultures of India, Sumerian, Babylon. K. Platelis has studied the Vedas, while J. Vaičiūnaitė and O. Baliukonytė have been attracted by Egyptian mythology.

Starting from the creation of the generation born in the 1950s Lithuanian literature meditates upon its European identity and finds remarkably many links with the East. It is interesting to note that a question of cognition of the Orient is alive in contemporary Lithuanian literature. It was always fashionable to explore the East in Europe, but that fashion came with its own geopolitical pretexts. In Lithuanian literature by contrast there has been a strong demand to master intellectually not only fashionable (the case of Jurga Ivanauskaitė), but also truly complex phenomena of the Eastern world.

The most interesting is the fact that the generation born in the 1950s restored the sense of authentic canon and modernism in Lithuanian literature, even though their work was the most affected by the question of the East. Moreover, that generation approached

some parameters of Christian Europe. One of them was neoclassicism, which became topical in Polish literature after the manifestos of Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz and Ryszard Przybylski. Polish theoreticians perceived classicism as a conception of the historical past and related it to the sources of Polish-European self-perception, with Mediterranean myths that nurtured Greek art and Christianity. The Poles enjoyed somewhat more political freedom during the Soviet period than the Lithuanians, and opened themselves to a systematic reflection on their literature. Lithuanians did not have such a systematic image and reached it more sporadically and intuitively, without manifestos. Still, the Polish examples of neoclassicism, the name and authority of Czesław Miłosz especially and his links with Lithuania provided additional impulses for understanding our proper European identity. The restoration of the Old European identity became a canon in the creation of the generation of writers born in the 1950s.

The discussion and the search for literary dynamics for Binkis' generation ended in the Soviet period, because history had become related to ideological sham and had become perverted. The generation born in the 1950s, with its meditative and nature-orientated verse brought us back to the Orient with an experience of urban civilization and history. Lithuanian creators learned more of the old, intellectually restored European foundations in their historical experience. It is an image of a passive, matricentric world, the prehistory of Christianity. It was not an exclusive text. Lithuanians mastered the experience of urban civilization and history in parallel, and the influence of Polish new classicism favoured that trend.

An uninterrupted connection with earth, water, moon, woman, life and death lies in the centre of Lithuanian poetic imagination. Lithuanian literature is substantially of rural and agricultural order. Echoes of city, civilization and history reach us through a sophisticated meditation on nature, more like a contextual life experience than a lifestyle which is explained by narration and action. Maybe that is why phenomenology seems topical and more touching than semiotic strategy of world clarification in literary experience. Thus, the national school of phenomenology responds to hermetic reflection departing from its own vital and existential experience. It

is much more modest in assimilating the international experience of literature research. Quite surely the Soviet hermetism and national self-defence provided a background for that. Differently from more Western orientated Poles and Czechs, Lithuanians have not yet found appropriate conceptions to name their own literary phenomena. In some cases, the Shinto-Japanese conceptions would suit Lithuanian literature better than the Western ones, for example, *mono no aware* (which means deep feelings that transcend the limits of individual perception of beauty).

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