

The myth of the nation of poets and mass poetry in Lithuania

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Abstract. There are two problems discussed in the article. The first one is the phenomenon of mass literature and semiotic approach to it. According to Lotman, mass literature of the 20th (and 21st) centuries is not so much an object of semiotics as of sociology. However, it is possible to consider mass literature of earlier times as an object of semiotics of culture. Lotman discusses Russian mass literature of the 18th and 19th centuries as such an object in the article “Massovaya literatura kak istoriko-kulturnaya problema”. Considering mass literature a dynamic factor of the semiotic system, Lotman distinguishes its main features: a high degree of automatization and syndrome of retardedness. In the second part of the article the author discusses the phenomenon of mass poetry in contemporary Lithuania. This kind of mass literature is much more similar to the phenomenon discussed by Lotman than to the mass literature of the postmodernist epoch. Lithuanian mass poetry employs the codes of national romanticism (the end of 19th century) and considers itself an ignored part of high culture. This sort of poetry unknown to Western societies exhibits archaising tendencies in the modern postsoviet culture.

In the article “Mass literature as a historical-cultural problem” Juri Lotman (1993: 380–383) defines mass literature first of all as a socio-logical problem rather than an object of textual semiotics. The discussion concerning this problem focuses not on the structural characteristics of different texts, but on the ways in which a text itself functions in the system of texts constituting culture. In this respect Lotman adopts the standpoint of a cultural semiotician that is criticised by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to him, cultural theoreticians who take the semiotic point of view and “seek in the literary system itself the principle of its dynamics”, forget

that the existence, form and direction of change depend not only on the “state of the system”, that is the “repertoire” of possibilities it offers, but also on the balance forces between social agents who have entirely different interests in the different possibilities available to them as stakes and who deploy every sort of strategy to make one set or other prevail. (Bourdieu 1994: 54–55)

Bourdieu describes this strategy as a “position taking in the field of cultural production”. Lotman, however, believes that the aspects enumerated by Bourdieu are crucial in the analysis of mass literature. Lotman’s article states that “the concept of mass literature is first of all defined by the attitude one or other community has towards a certain group of texts” (Lotman 1993: 381). What Bourdieu refers to as a “social agent” and the “position taking in the field of cultural production”, Lotman in turn calls a community and attitude of community. Lotman’s remark is important as it shows him having recognised the limitations of the analysis based on, as Pierre Bourdieu keeps pointing out, a “phonological model”. It is not that this model would be impossible to apply but a different model (in this case sociological) may be more fruitful for the analysis of certain objects. Lotman’s article implies that mass literature is one of those objects.

It is true, however, that there lies some sort of contradiction. Lotman distinguishes two types of mass literature: the mass literature of earlier times (the 18th and 19th century Russian literature) which he discusses from the historical-cultural point of view; and the mass literature as a phenomenon of the 20th (and, we can add, of the 21st) century as well as an object of sociology. The author distances himself from the latter and focuses on the former (that is the mass literature of earlier times) as on a dynamic factor of the semiotic system (that is, he investigates the relations between texts and other texts rather than between texts and social “agents”).

In Lotman’s opinion, mass literature as a part of the semiotic structure and a historical phenomenon stands out due to a high degree of automatization (clichés). It is characterised by the syndrome of retardedness:

The most different ideological artistic systems of the past epochs continue functioning in mass literature as a live body. At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, mass literature resembled an enormous reserve where animals familiar to a well educated reader from museum exhibits only, lived and procreated in natural conditions. (Lotman 1993: 386)

This witty remark precisely defines the mass literature produced in Lithuania these days. From a typological point of view, this phenomenon is far closer to the one Lotman discusses than to contemporary mass literature. It is not related to, or little related to mass media, nor is it orientated to commercial success. The publication of the bulk of this sort of poetry books is funded by authors themselves, the editions are limited, as in the case of the so-called elite poetry, and the works are most often distributed among the authors' friends and acquaintances. The term 'mass poetry' is reflected not in the number of editions but in the number of titles — statistically they are more numerous than the titles of poetry books published by the prestigious publishing houses and even popular genres of prose fiction such as detective and love stories.

This throws some light on the situation in Lithuanian literature that had started to emerge since the beginning of its formation: there has always been more poetry than prose in Lithuania. Furthermore, in terms of proportion, there has always been more aesthetically valuable poetry than prose. According to the young poet and literary critic Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, it is only in this literary kind that Lithuanian literature feels equal to Western literatures (Kvietkauskas 2001: 93). Traditionally, such factors as high ranking poetry and the prestige of poetic activity are characteristics typical of a nation that created the national state late and is constantly daunted by insecurity. In such a nation, the poet plays the role of a charismatic voice and conscience of the nation. The creators of mass literature still find this role extremely attractive. Very often, however, the reception of the so-called maniac poetry, the critical attention crucial to its legitimisation as a part of literature, is minimal. The preparation of the *Encyclopaedia of the Lithuanian Literature* (2001) by the Institute of the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore raised a slight concern: What should be done with the heap of books mostly published by provincial publishing houses? Should they be considered to be literature or simply graphomania? What if there are real talents among the authors of those abundant books? The literary critics who wrote the *Encyclopaedia* were given the right to make a decision, thus, granted the power of legitimisation. They were not very compassionate. As a result, a lot of versifiers were crossed out from the list of "high" literature.

In the post-modernist epoch, mass culture tends to reflect itself as massive; it implants its manifestations into the elite literature in all possible ways, thus seeking to eliminate the boundaries between the

two types of culture. In this way, it starts functioning as “resistance activity” in relation to the elite culture. In terms of Lithuanian mass poetry we face a slightly different case. The inner contradiction mentioned by Lotman defines this literary form best. According to Lotman, there have to exist norms and attitudes in a society that would regard this sort of literature as being of low quality and ignore it. But a certain community would consider this sort of literature as having full cultural value and displaying characteristic features of high culture (Lotman 1993: 282).

The norms and attitudes of the “high” literature are represented by the literary critics mentioned above and the creators of elite culture themselves, most often identified with the Lithuanian Writers’ Union (LWU). It is this Union that serves as an example for creating parallel organisations such as the Independent Writers’ Union and the Lithuanian Rural Writers’ Union. The title of the latter would imply some sort of regional distribution: the Lithuanian Writers’ Union represents the city, first of all Vilnius. “Other” and “different” kinds of literature are produced in the countryside (this word should be interpreted as a synonym of the word “province”). In this case, the second largest city of Lithuania, the former interim capital Kaunas falls into the category of province. From the statistical point of view Kaunas’ citizens make up the largest part of city inhabitants among the members of the two organisations in question. Furthermore, this fact confirms the fact that there is a huge cultural and economic centralisation in Lithuania: at present Kaunas is lagging behind Vilnius and Klaipėda in both aspects.¹ As the literary critic Donata Mitaitė observes, the title Independent Writers’ Union hides a contradiction — “independent but, however, gathered into a union” (Mitaitė 2001: 2). Reading the autobiographies of the Union members published in a separate book, one clearly sees that independence in this case primarily means an independence from the Lithuanian Writers’ Union. When I mentioned the parallel organisations that were being created, I avoided the word “alternative” as there is no alternative spirit or revolt here. A considerable part of this union members mention their attempt to join the Lithuanian Writers’ Union and being asked to provide things like reference letters, critical articles on their works, finally, different editions of their works. They attempt to use

¹ By the way, literary critics are talking about such a phenomenon as the “Klaipėda school” in contemporary Lithuanian ‘elite’ poetry.

political arguments in a manipulative way, as if some sort of political affiliations were required. In this case, they probably refer to the Soviet years, although the phenomenon in question thrived after the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Lithuania. There are two main reasons for this: political (censorship minimised) and economic (market economy eliminated the monopoly of the state funded publishing houses). Nevertheless, the former chairman of the Independent Writers' Union Bronius Jauniškis explains the way in which he found himself in this position: he says he had waited as a candidate to join the Lithuanian Writers' Union with the help of reference letters from celebrities for a long time (*Lietuvos nepriklausomieji rašytojai* 1998: 3). Thus, writers belonging to the category we are focusing on, the majority of whom are poets, regard their own work as a part of "high" culture but undermined and underrated by the so called "literary monopolists". However, for some of the "independent" writers, belonging to a "monopolistic organisation" and taking part in its activities and events remain one of the main aims, or to put it in terms of A. J. Greimas' semiotics, an "object of value". Having failed to gain it, a "shadow" activity is launched (organising similar poetry feasts, establishing prizes, even writing monographs, etc.). Should we have to reconstruct an invariant "independent" writer's biography, we would necessarily have to mention them having been introduced to "famous" writers, that is, representatives of the elite culture. An invariant biography of such a writer would also contain some information on the relations of his or her output with the country's history. Most of these writers reached maturity during the Soviet period. Almost all of them highlight the fact that they were persecuted by the Soviet Government, KGB, participated in the resistance movement. A big number of writers penning the poetry in question are really former deportees. There are quite a few cases, though, in which participating in Soviet structures is presented as resistant activity. Almost all of them started writing poetry at elementary school and sent it to wall newspapers, regional and school press. Later, the hardships of life, daily routine (in the autobiographies of women most often marriage is mentioned as an obstacle) suppressed the need to write, which was followed by the Independence Movement *Sąjūdis* and the Lithuanian rebirth (the year 1989–90). Sentences of a similar kind appear in probably ninety percent of the autobiographies: "When Lithuania was surged by the wave of rebirth, I spread my wings" (Valentinas Vytautas Navickas, in: *Lietuvos*

nepriklausomieji rašytojai 1998: 1973). “The period of the country’s rebirth awoke in free thought, opened up a new page of history, turned our hearts and minds towards a new cognition of the world. [...] the new poetry array was also replenished and enriched by new themes and colours” (Janina Brazauskienė, in: *Lietuvos nepriklausomieji rašytojai* 1998: 49).

However, the new themes and colours are about one hundred years old. The codes of the Lithuanian national romanticism that flourished at the beginning of the 19th century may well be attributed to this poetry. Maironis, the most famous Lithuanian national romantic bard is most often mentioned as the highest authority. Bernardas Brazdžionis who wrote the poem “*Šaukiu aš tautą, GPU užguitą*” (“My Call to the Nation Oppressed by GPU”) in 1941 and has a reputation of being the herald of the nation is put next. Justinas Marcinkevičius, an outstanding poetic and public figure of the soviet period occupies the third position on the list². The above listed poets wrote multi-layered poetry but the writers in question focus exceptionally on the aspect in which linguistic power relations are displayed. They rely on the authority of the poetic discourse itself that intensifies during politically unstable, marginal periods, when poetry really “goes out to the masses”, is read at meetings and demonstrations thus combining functions of both sacral and political discourses. It is noteworthy that the biographies of the writers under consideration give a thorough account of their public, readings, meetings with readers, participation in different events, in short, everything that helps to establish the authority of a poet as an exclusive cell of society. The orientation towards collective, public readings is justified by some of the formal peculiarities of the texts — this sort of poetry is dominated by quatrains, oratorical sonority, syntactic constructions characteristic of folklore.

Erotic love would provide some sort of competition to the love for the native land (which is a conflict common in the Lithuanian literature at the beginning of the last century). The latter is portrayed using the repertoire of romantic poetry. In this field, authorities are different. They are neo-romantics who used the poetics of romance as a possibility for irony and playfulness and combined it with the

² Justinas Marcinkevičius is the winner of the Baltic Assembly award in 2001.

elements of the avant-garde thus marking the renewal of Lithuanian poetry in 1940s.

Alas, irony is the last thing to be found in the poetry under discussion. One of the basic characteristics of this literature is an enormous seriousness in the light of which any problem is tackled. The introduction to the book *I Versify with my Heart, Sing with my Lips* by the poetess under the pseudonym *Pievų Smilga* (Bent Grass of Meadows) says: "Let it [the book] not be opened by people who expect to find new ways of expression. Let those who love the motherhood sky, childhood roads and their mother press it to their heart" (Pievų Smilga 2000: 3). As in the case of the poetics of socialist realism, the topic is considered to be something much more sublime and important than form. In this way, repetition and cliché are not regarded as drawbacks (it is mentioned in the introduction quoted above that the poetess is not afraid of repetitions), if only it helps to express true feelings. Sincerity in this type of poetry is rated as a super-value that helps to line up in sequence and present a very clear moral value system that is only illustrated by verse. Therefore, moralising and didactics replace irony, the inseparable aspect of modern literature that does not ensure this sort of moral security.

The biographies of the poets whose poetry is being discussed, often recount injustices and hardships they have suffered. The former system is the first to blame, then come those who failed to recognise and understand this sincere poetry propagating and declaring "high" moral values. The latter are first and foremost referred to as "literature monopolists".

One of the reasons why those two participants in culture fail to understand each other is probably their radically different position in the field of culture. In more than ten years, professional writers who produce the so-called elite literature have left behind the advantages granted by the Aesopian language, have more or less put up with the different status of poetry and a smaller audience. In other words, they are turned to the present time, the current situation. The creators of the type of poetry we conditionally called mass poetry remain faithful to the romantic illusion that the poet is the herald of the nation, its informal leader. It is an illusion that was reborn for a short while around the year 1990. This sort of poetry exhibits archaising cultural tendencies, a non-critical, unreflective relation to history that is being mocked by Lithuanian television humour programmes also belonging

to the mass culture. However, the relations between different types of the mass culture would be a different topic.

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Миф народа поэтов и феномен массовой поэзии в Литве

В статье обсуждается проблема массовой литературы и семиотический подход к ней. Юрий Лотман согласен с социологами культуры в том, что современная массовая литература является объектом не столько семиотики, сколько социологии культуры. Однако схожее явление в более ранние эпохи может быть исследовано как объект семиотики культуры. Пример такого исследования приведен в статье Лотмана “Массовая литература как историко-культурная проблема”. В контексте этой проблематики рассматривается феномен современной литовской массовой поэзии. Исследования показали, что эта поэзия гораздо более похожа на феномен, обсуждаемый Лотманом, чем на современную массовую литературу. Она открыто использует коды национального романтизма и воспринимает себя как часть элитной культуры. Этот тип поэзии неизвестен на Западе и он свидетельствует об архаизирующих тенденциях в постсоветской культуре.

“Poeetide rahva” müüt ja massikirjanduse fenomen Leedus

Vaatluse all on massikirjanduse olemus ja sellele semiootilise lähenemise võimalikkus. Juri Lotman nõustub kultuurisotsioloogidega selles, et kaasaja massikirjandus on mitte niivõrd semiootika kui kultuuri sotsioloogia objekt. Kuid taolist fenomeni varasematel aegadel võib siiski käsitleda kultuurisemiootika objektina. Just sellise lähenemise näiteks on Lotmani artikkel “Massikirjandus kui ajaloolis-kultuuriline probleem”. Antud problemaatika kontekstis vaadeldakse leedu kaasaegse massiluule fenomeni. Uurimused on näidanud, et see luule sarnaneb tunduvalt rohkem Lotmani poolt kirjeldatud nähtusele kui tänapäeva massikirjandusele. Massiluules kasutatakse avalikult rahvusromantismi koode ja ta väljendab end eliitkultuuri osana. Selline luuletüüp ei ole Lääne kultuuriruumis tuntud ja annab tunnistust arhaiseerivatest tendentsidest postsovjetlikus kultuuris.