



The Dedalus Book
of
Lithuanian Literature



Edited by Almantas Samalavičius

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Dedalus

The Editor

Born in 1963, Almantas Samalavicius is a cultural historian, critic and essayist. The author of eleven books and seven collections of essays he is a professor at Vilnius University. He has served as president of PEN Lithuania and is currently its vice president.

His books, articles and essays have been widely translated. His most recent book to appear in English is *Ideas and Structures: Essays in Architectural History* (2011).

The Translators

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Elizabeth Novickas has a Master's degree in Lithuanian Language and Literature from the University of Illinois. She has worked as a bookbinder and fine printer in Urbana, Illinois; as a newspaper designer and cartographer in Springfield, Illinois; and as editorial system administrator at the Chicago Sun-Times. Besides translating Lithuanian into English, she is the editor of the journal *Lituanus*. In 2011 she won the St. Jerome Prize from the Association of Lithuanian Literary Translators.

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Jayde Will has a master's degree in Fenno-Ugric languages from the University of Tartu, and is currently an assistant at the Department of Translation and Interpretation Studies at Vilnius University. His poetry and prose translations of Lithuanian, Estonian and Russian authors have appeared in a number of anthologies, including the most recent *Best European Fiction 2012 Anthology*. He is currently working on a collection of selected poems by Estonian poet and prose writer Eeva Park. He resides in Vilnius.

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Introduction: Time Lost and Found

Almantas Samalavicius

The great social changes that occurred in Lithuania in the 1990s were triggered by the collapse of the Soviet empire, which had colonised the Baltic nations and ideologically controlled the whole of central and eastern Europe for half a century. This, along with the onset of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, hastened the events that led to the start of a second hard-won independence for Lithuania. For the first time my generation – born and raised in the Soviet era – had the opportunity to breathe in the life-giving and heady air of freedom. The current crop of twenty-year-olds, born in an already independent country, accept what for us was an intoxicating independence as something natural and ordinary. Though many Lithuanians had long dreamed of life in a free country, for my generation and our elders, it was most likely something that would occur and be experienced only once in a lifetime, and only under favourable historical circumstances.

Similarly, for most writers of the 20th century, freedom and independence were not self-evident truths, and nor was independence seen as guaranteed to last; it was only in the second decade of the 20th century that Lithuanians succeeded in shaking off the yoke of the tsarist Russian empire. This ancient and at times vast country, which at one point stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, bore this subjugation from the very end of the 18th century, when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – a union which was constantly undermined by external forces and internal disagreements – was weakened and collapsed. In the end, having lost its sovereignty, it was an easy prey for an expanding Russia. For nearly 150 years Lithuania was ruled by a foreign colonial regime that consciously and maliciously ravaged and ruined the country's cultural and religious institutions, crippled collective historical memory and fiercely suppressed (but fortunately did not extinguish) even the merest manifestations of a desire for freedom.

As the storms of the First World War raged, all of the regional representatives in Lithuania gathered in Vilnius for a conference. It was there that the Lithuanian people announced their decision to reclaim their independence. On 16 February 1918, the Council of Lithuania proclaimed the historic Act of Independence of Lithuania and quickly took action to consolidate independence. This event was a natural outcome of the formation of a national consciousness that started at the beginning of the 19th century – a process later described by Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet of Lithuanian origin and Nobel Prize laureate, as bordering on the miraculous.

The same could also be said about the incredible, phoenix-like reconstruction of the Lithuanian language, which formed the basis of the intellectual programme of the 19th century national liberation movement. It

had been pushed out of public life and into the cultural fringes by the Russian colonial regime and its use had been entirely forbidden in public, in print and in schools after the second of two uprisings in the 19th century. But through great and often brave efforts spanning just a few decades, the Lithuanian language had been reborn.

Throughout the decades that the ban was in effect, the life of the Lithuanian language was maintained by way of books, mostly of religious content, which had been smuggled in from Prussia. However, even this could not effectively stop the degradation of the language. Many of the works published in Lithuanian in the 19th century clearly reflected that foreign vernacularisms and words had been imported into, and were undermining, the Lithuanian language. Elements of the Russian and Polish languages relentlessly penetrated into the structure and vocabulary of written Lithuanian, turning an archaic language into a combination of native and foreign tongues that quickly lost its characteristic identity and life. After the colonial regime brought into effect the ban on the Lithuanian language in 1864 that would last another forty years, the written word continued to grow sickly and wither, becoming a caricature of its former self. Fortunately, the national newspaper *Ausra* (*Dawn*), which was established in the 1890s, and later *Varpas* (*The Bell*) took up the mission to revive the Lithuanian language, strengthen national consciousness and rebuild historical memory in order to strengthen the foundations of Lithuanian identity. In a relatively short period of time, both periodicals played extremely meaningful and unexpectedly successful roles in the achievement of these goals. Even after the newspapers ceased publication, the work towards establishing an independent state and a shared sense of nationhood did not stop. It was taken up by other periodicals which continued to foster the seedlings of modern Lithuanian consciousness and identity. It would later become clear that this work was indispensable to the restoration of the lost institutional foundations of Lithuanian statehood.

It is therefore unsurprising that the themes of history and national identity have often been reflected by Lithuanian prose and poetry. It is probably also not difficult to understand why, for a nation deprived of its independence on several occasions, untangling these problems is so important. After nearly two centuries of Russian subjugation that witnessed the erosion of national traditions and identity, the inter-war period of independence only lasted a little over two decades. It was marked by a rapid, even feverish, period of creation of culture and cultural institutions but was followed by the occupation by the Soviet Union in 1940, which resulted in a new fifty-year period of colonisation. All of this left significant marks on the collective memory of Lithuanian society, culture and the body politic. The lasting mentality and institutional legacy, though sometimes bemoaned, are still felt in Lithuanian culture today.

In the 1940s the hopes held by some of the country's leftist intellectuals – that the composite nature of the Soviet Union would protect the most essential elements of Lithuanian society and provide an element of cultural

autonomy – were dashed. The onset of the first Soviet occupation brought with it mass deportations of citizens to Siberian gulags. Although the deportations targeted representatives of the intellectual class, the ensuing suffering was not inflicted solely on adults but also on children, even infants – a fact which graphically demonstrated the true face of the communist regime and the real aspirations of the occupiers. This experience also encouraged a second significant loss of Lithuanian intellectuals when a large number of writers and other artists moved to the West at the end of the Second World War. Following the movement of the front lines, they understood that if they remained in their homeland, they would be condemned – if not to death, then to prison, exile and other forms of repression. Their suspicions were soon confirmed. The post-war communist regime proved to be particularly brutal and the returning Soviet government initiated a fresh wave of deportations. Writers whose pasts, works or views raised even the slightest suspicion or doubt were questioned, tried, deported to *gulags* and condemned to a long exile. Those who had managed to avoid repression – typically as a result of their social origins, the expression of an outlook more acceptable to the Soviet state or a chameleon-like ability to adapt – were left with two options: either singing the praises of Stalinism or remain silent for decades on end. However, just keeping quiet was a dangerous option. A silent (non-writing) writer could be accused of harbouring a conscious desire *not* to glorify Joseph Stalin, *not* to support the ideology of the Communist Party and *not* to enact its requests. That mindset was a prelude to new types of persecution. As a result, the first decade after the end of the Second World War was the most difficult for the survival of Lithuanian literature. Some writers retreated underground or joined anti-Soviet fighters in the forests and lived in bunkers where they wrote poems in their notebooks that rarely reached the wider masses. For most of these writers, their fates ended tragically. In 1953, when the armed anti-Soviet resistance was finally quelled, the occupying regime made short work of free speech.

Soviet censors used every means at their disposal to control literary content and form. Any deviation from socialist realist norms was severely punished. Many of the works written in the post-war period were in reality the fruit of forced ‘collaboration’ between authors and censors. In certain cases writers were forced to rewrite their novels or short stories several times in accordance with suggestions made by censors, especially in those instances when the writer’s family or loved ones were imprisoned in Siberian *gulags*. In exchange for this literary collaboration, the writers were offered the promise that the suffering of their incarcerated loved ones would be lessened or shortened. It was in this way that the work of the inter-war writer Antanas Vienuolis was compromised: his son was serving time in a Soviet *gulag*. He wrote a second version of his socialist-realist novel *Puodziunkiemis* under the strict supervision of a Communist Party ‘co-author’, paying careful attention to the ‘editing’ provided.

Some writers became victims of both physical and intellectual oppression.

The talented writer Kazys Boruta, whose excellent novel *Baltaragis' Windmill* (*Baltaragio malunas*) was widely acclaimed and has been translated into English, was imprisoned in independent Lithuania for his membership of the outlawed socialist-revolutionary party; in the post-war period he was incarcerated by the Soviet regime for defending his position on national independence. Poet, dramatist, critic and professor at Vilnius University, Balys Sruoga was incarcerated along with other Lithuanian intellectuals at the Stutthof concentration camp by the Nazis. He died before the publication of *Forest of the Gods* (*Dievu miskas*), a memoir of his time in the Nazi camps. A book which critics later hailed as staggering and ironic, it was banned by the censors and languished for decades in a publishing-house drawer.

Censorship greatly affected the literary climate, spreading mediocrity and opportunism whilst studiously assisting in consolidating the socialist-realist literary canon. Conditions changed somewhat after Nikita Khrushchev's famous speech at the 20th Soviet Party Congress in 1956. Encouraged by the new, apparently more moderate tone emanating from Moscow, Lithuanian writers became bolder in liberating themselves from the clutches of the compulsory canon and searched for new literary forms as well as more diverse creative motifs. An interest in literary techniques such as impressionism, interior monologue and increasingly individualised styles of expression began to appear in Lithuanian prose. At the same time growing attention was being paid to themes that had earlier been forbidden such as forced collectivisation as well as sudden and massive urbanisation, while there was also rising interest in drama depicting post-war existence. Lithuanian filmmakers also attempted to crack open this latter genre and a fine example of this trend came in the form of art film *No One Wanted to Die* (*Niekas nenorejo mirti*), by the renowned director Vytautas Zalakevicius. Unfortunately, the 'thaw' in the Soviet regime's stance towards any kind of independent thought was short-lived, shattering the naïve illusions held by writers and other intellectuals that it was going to be possible to create 'socialism with a human face' in the Soviet bloc.

One might expect that there might be a search within literary forms for ways to express one's true feelings and ideas in a society where free speech is restricted and repressed. However, unlike in other central and eastern European countries where fierce censorship created stronger preconditions for the blossoming of self-publishing (*samizdat*), nothing of the sort occurred in Lithuania. Although banned periodicals and regularly issued self-published editions did appear in the country such as the multi-volume *Chronicle of the Catholic Church* (*Kataliku Baznycios kronika*), most publications of this type reached only a very small circle of readers.

Furthermore, the heavy repressions enacted in the first post-war decade and the suppression of the anti-Soviet armed resistance had considerable long-term effects on the collective memory. Many writers, creators and intellectuals imagined their role in the legal public sphere as one of being devoted to fostering and protecting Lithuanian culture, particularly language,