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The Fundamental Incompatibility of the European and Soviet Identities

Karolina Bagdone
Vilnius University and Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (Lithuania)

Abstract

In Soviet-occupied states, including Lithuania, attempts were made to create a new civilizational system and a new consciousness. This consciousness had to resist any Western model of the world which valued personalities, democracy, individuality, and freedom. It was being created through repressions and attempts to remove self-reflection from peoples' thinking. Individuality was reduced to the life of a peasant or equated to the crowd, while doubts, inquiries, and critical thinking were completely repressed to instil complacency. The Soviet identity existed as a generalized entirety of all Soviet socialist republics. This identity had some aspects of each nation, but their similarity and homogeneousness were strongly emphasized. Lithuanians attempted to define themselves in these conditions. They turned to the supposedly great history of Lithuania and attempted to create a Lithuanian identity which would need protection and defence from everyone and everything. This position is contradictory to the European identity, which constantly re-creates itself, values diversity, fragmentation, and constant change. Is it possible to reconcile these identities? Did a universal identity, i.e. a similar one to the European identity, exist in Soviet times? How could it emerge in Lithuanian poetry in the second part of the 20th century? In my presentation, I will briefly talk about the identity model which emerged in the creative works of Eduardas Mieželaitis and Sigitas Geda. Miezelaitis was the founder of Soviet modern poetry and presented the form of free poetic language within the context of the Soviet within the context of the Soviet internationalism regime. He expressed an identity which is characterized by defensiveness, overprotectiveness, and a nomenclatural position – to criticize the bourgeois life and culture and promote the friendship of the global proletariat. The creative works Geda, at first glance, could be considered as less ideological and based on cosmopolitanism of modernism, and an expression of a universal European identity. His works are characterized by an innovative relation to tradition, distance from the reader, and a complex poetic language.

Keywords
Identity, nationalism, Lithuanian, European, Soviet, poetry.

Introduction

My study is an analysis of three identity models (national, European and Soviet), their collision, overlap, transformation, and emergence in Lithuanian poetry during the second part of the 20th century. I will focus my attention on the phenomenon of the Lithuanian national identity, which is locally distinct, but open to Europe (Europeanness). I will also analyse how Soviet ideology impacted and formed people's self-depiction. I will use the sociology of culture as the theoretical framework of this analysisand will discuss the three-fold culture design model and its ties to identity studies.

Methods to create an identity

First of all, I would like define the term *national identity*. From the perspective of the sociology of culture, it is possible to unfold a tendency to reduce culture into the national identity. To do this, we need to analyse the dominant idea of the Central and Eastern European culture. Lithuanian sociologist Vytautas Kavolis saw consciousness as a basic concept which allows us to analyse national culture, history and the relation between the person and the society[1]. Therefore, by using the principles of the consciousness, we might be able to see how culture is reduced into the national identity[2]. We will also be able to show the connection between the European cultural identity and the national (cultural) identity.

3 models of the identity and their (in)compatibility

In his analysis of culture as a framework for the meaning of the world Kavolis distinguished 3 models of culture[3], which are the basis for my analysis of identity:

1. Culture as an open network of communication, where everything starts operating spontaneously as people act together. Here, spontaneity and coincidence are the most important, and there is no need to organize any operational mechanisms.

2. Culture as the relation between a centre (or centres) and its open periphery. The two are separate in archaic cultures, while modern and postmodern cultures have a circulation of values between the centre(s) and the periphery.

3. Culture as a hierarchical and closed system, which is maintained by power relations, obedience and a single compulsory purpose for everyone.

Each of these models emphasises the importance of some features over others. Kavolis states that "every cultural configuration is integrated by criteria for significance, and these criteria are separate for each configuration. A culture is connected not by that which "is known by everyone", but by that which "is important to everyone"[4]. Therefore, if culture is understood as a certain system of relations, then more general frameworks can be created when analysing the relations of its phenomenon. These general frameworks would be appropriate for the analysis of identity, where certain cultural "traits" or actions are more recognizable or meaningful than others.

a) open Europeanness and its unity in diversity

Europeanness balances between the first two cultural framework models. This is due to several reasons:
1. Europe finds it difficult to describe itself even after it has laid the foundation for Western culture. Remi Brague defines Europeanness deductively. He states that Europeanness exists not as a permanent characteristic, but as changing localization, a certain totality which is best described by what it is not[5]. In this case, Europeanness is discovered outside of the geographic boundaries of Europe, and it is not just a combination of elements often related to Ancient Greece, Rome, and Christianity. It is a rather conscious choice to integrate the political and cultural achievements of others, and an ability to see itself from the outside. The European identity is not monolithic, it is a constant becoming / self-creation, self-civilizing openness and the acceptance of *the other*.
2. The expansion of the European identity. It is no longer just the source of Christianity, democracy, human rights or humanism, but something more.
3. The core characteristic of the European identity is 'unity in diversity', a balance between differences and similarities, multiculturalism and nationality, tradition and modernity.

b) The national identity and its relation to liberalism

We see our own identity as the central one, which,is compared to others. In 1995, Kavolis wrote that "in the contemporary culture of Lithuania, representations of nationalism demand symbolic rights to be the centre. For something to become the centre of culture, it must be formally or informally recognized as such by 'the whole culture'.[6]" As nationalism becomes the centre of culture, the national identity is seen as unquestionably exceptional, different, or even better than others.
According to Donskis, there are two types of nationalism: liberal and conservative nationalism[7]. They are discerned by their approach to cosmopolitanism.
1. In liberal nationalism, the national identity does not exist by itself and allows *otherness* to enter. It is dominated by a reflexive stance and the adoption and reconstruction of European features, for example the assimilation of Christian culture, caring about personality, individuality, respect for freedom and privacy. This liberal nationalistic model of identity would allow us to see Lithuanianness as an equal partner of European culture.
2. Conservative nationalism could be called provincial or *folk*. This type of nationalism is prone to rejecting and eliminating all cosmopolitan stances and the continuously created identity. It focuses its attention on preserving its own identity. Such nationalism is characteristic of the Lithuanian identity. It strives to preserve certain phases of national identity and to emphasize how the earlier identity was the best and ideal. For example, a lot of attention is given to the pagan past, which is considered the only true beginning of the Lithuanian identity. Lithuanian language is also extremely protected. So much so, that fines are given for the incorrect use of the language in the public sphere. This conservative nationalistic identity is even considered as a preserve of national identity by Lithuanian scholars.

As various identity models are struggling to appear and establish themselves in Lithuania, Europeanness is seen not as a natural addition, but as another threat. The Lithuanian identity frees itself from moral provincialism only for pragmatic reasons.

c) Closed cultural identity and the Soviet times

In Soviet-occupied states, including Lithuania, attempts were made to create a new civilizational system and a new consciousness. This consciousness had to resist any Western model of the world, which valued personalities, democracy, individuality, and freedom. A new consciousness was being created through repressions and attempts to remove self-reflection from peoples' thinking. Individuality was reduced to the life of a peasant or equated to the crowd, while doubts, inquiries, and critical thinking were completely repressed to instil complacency. The Soviet identity existed as a generalized entirety of all Soviet socialist republics. This identity had some aspects of each nation, but their similarity and homogeneousness were strongly emphasized. Lithuanians attempted to define

themselves in these conditions. They turned to the supposedly great history of Lithuania and attempted to create a Lithuanian identity which would need protection and defence from everyone and everything. This position is contradictory to the European identity, which constantly re-creates itself, values diversity, fragmentation, and constant change. This raises some questions. Is it possible to reconcile these identities? Did a universal identity, that is, one similar to the European identity, exist in Soviet times? How could it emerge in Lithuanian poetry in the second part of the 20th century?

The Soviet traveller representing the Soviet-Lithuanian identity

Eduardas Miezelaitis was the pioneer of Soviet modern poetry and created the impression of free poetic language within the context of the Soviet regime. He expressed an identity which is characterized by defensiveness, overprotectiveness, and a nomenclatural position. He critiqued the bourgeois life and culture and promoted the friendship of the global proletariat.

Miezelaitis attempted to create Western literature that would fulfil the basic criteria for art present since Ancient times – persuasiveness. At the start of his career, he created traditional socialist realism, where he praised Stalin or the everyday life of the proletariat. In the sixties, his poetic language changed to a modern one, and Miezelaitis started writing poetry that focused on the fundamental search for human identity. His readers of that time admired the universality, unexpected relations of images, abstractions, first-person speech and self-reflection in his poetry. This self-reflection is the basic characteristic of the European identity and Western literature. Its existence in the text allowed the poetry of Miezelaitis to approach the Western standard and, at the same time, to critique it.

As a Soviet poet, Miezelaitis had the opportunity to travel the world. He travels the world, observes the life and culture of various cities, and writes about it. He usually portrays the life of artists and musicians, the outcasts and those at the margins of society: prostitutes, drunks, and beggars. In many cases his sight is static, romantic and rather banal or even naïve. He has a clear moral position, for example, Paris looks like a space of an immoral feast in his poetry. Its citizens need only wine and obscure food, which no one in the Soviet system would put into their mouths, they need one-night stands, songs and obscure philosophy. His poems show the Parisian reality as shallow and bourgeois, and only on the other side – that is in the Soviet Lithuania – does a more profound reality exist. Miezelaitis' poetry projects a relation of the centre and the periphery without the possibility of *otherness*, because its highest priority is to establish uniformity.

His outlook on the West shows how we should see the Soviet Lithuanian identity, but I want to stress that we can derive meaning not only from what is clearly shown and described in the poetry, but also from what is omitted from the text. The essential feature missing in these texts is work. One of Miezelaitis' reviewers complained that the poet should speak not through abstractions, associations and complex conjunctions, but to pay more attention to meanings which could be easily understood by a simple reader and to focus on the everyday life of the builders of communism – the proletariat. But this is exactly the game that Miezelaitis plays. He critiques Europe, its freedom and boldness, individuality and cultural heritage, and calls the reader to turn to the comprehendible Soviet reality, where everything is simple, clear, and for everyone. This turn is shown as a constant search for a true human being in his poetry. Miezelaitis is unable to find such a human being outside of the Soviet world. It is impossible to find, because he is not looking for a unique, but rather for a collective individual, a nameless mass, which is the only thing that has power. Nevertheless, his poetry establishes a new poetic language, but it also establishes a new order and a new myth of man or hero, and it is the fulfilment of the Soviet idea of progress. Miezelatis uses his poetry to define the collective proletariat identity, not the identity of an individual. This collective proletariat is the true human being he is searching for.

It is important to note that the artificially repetitive and ritual search for a true human being was particularly important in the Soviet system. The existence of repetitiveness and rituality entrenches the archaic culture defined by Kavolis. Even though the image of change and transformation is created, it is only a myth. Constant, uniform demonstrations, celebrations and mass meetings were strictly regulated and existed as an instrument to train people. It seems that Miezelaitis attempts to train people through the poetic text, to prepare them for a new identity. It is sort of a paradox that the Soviet system created the myth of a free human being. This free person existed not as a subject, but as an instrument. Such a human being exists in the grand moment of creating the future, where he/she constantly waits for that brighter tomorrow, which is a dream come true. The life of this human being is important to the extent to which it contributes to the creation of that future world.

Was a Universal (European) Identity Possible in Soviet Times?

Sigitas Geda was a Lithuanian poet, translator, playwright, essayist, critic and a member of the Lithuanian independence movement, and of the Lithuanian parliament. The creative works of Geda, at first glance, could be considered as less ideological and an expression of a universal European identity. It is characterized by an innovative relation to tradition, distance from the reader, and a complex poetic language.

In general, Geda saw himself as a man of universal culture, and the synthesizer of Western and global literature. This synthesis could be considered the basic trait which represents Europeanness. Geda's poetry contains freedom and accidentally, constant circulation and spontaneously formed relations. All of these could allow us to see his poetry as opposing the Soviet-era literature. The world beyond Soviet Lithuania seeps from its usual places and

spaces and settles inside the imagination of a person. This world is no longer an unchanging satellite, used to express a certain relation of one's own to the alien (*the other*), but it exists as content which creates a complete poetic image. His poetry does not seemingly leave any room for the separation that is so characteristic of the provincial Lithuanianness, but it synthesizes the complete experience and history of the world. The separations of man-versus-world, man-versus-nature disappear, and everything becomes part of the poetic world.

It is also important to note the poetic language used by Geda. Contrary to Miezelaitis, who tried to persuade and establish poetic images in the imagination of the reader, Geda receded away from the reader. Abstractions and unexpected visual links only made it harder for the reader to understand Geda's text. In his poetry, Geda created a need for an independently thinking, conscious and sophisticated reader, who cannot identify with the poetic reality or easily understand it. This caused significant outcries from the Soviet censors and even the readers of that time.

The framework for modern Lithuanian poetry was drawn by the duality of modernity-versus-archaism, sovietism-versus-westernism in his poetry. This novelty appeared in Geda's poetry through the relation to tradition. This relation signifies the perspective of a European identity. I have mentioned that I see Europeanness as an open and dialogic relation with *the other*. This relation is also characterized by transformation and self-reflection, not imitation. Geda constantly highlighted the importance of tradition and having a source, especially emphasizing the oldest texts of archaic cultures[8]. Therefore, tradition is not a monument to be protected, but rather a sculpture that is constantly re-built, and Lithuanianness is created by mixing various 'ingredients' of Western culture and conveying them anew in a poetic context. For example, Lithuania no longer exists as an authentic and unique unit in world history or geography, it absorbs Europeanness and turns it into Lithuanianness. It this way, the relation with *the other* changes, and the boundaries of Lithuanianness are expanded by changing the European landscape.

Conclusion

The Lithuanian identity is becoming more complex, cosmopolitan and open. Nevertheless, Europe or the exotic Caucasus are lithuanized in Geda's poetry only through stereotypes[9]. For example, Lithuanian pan pipes are played, and fire is worshiped in the Caucasus, cows moo in Europe, and wheat is discovered in Asia. These anachronisms can be interpreted as a particularly wide gap between different cultures, complete alienation – so great, in fact, that there are no authentic terms to use, and one's own imagery is used[10]. Therefore, Lithuanianness is only partially open or attempting to join the global history and is also rural and a-historic. The lyrical subjects of Geda's poetry still have the standard and stereotypical roles – the active man and the passive woman. It is because of this that I would define the way Lithuanian language is used in the poems as the essential trait of identity[11]. This identity appears through avant-garde games of poetic etymologisms or *dialectic* versions of suffixes.

Lastly, this analysis of different identities enables us to observe the fragmentation and complexity of Soviet Lithuanian Europeaness, which accommodates self-contradictory aspects. These aspects once again point to the fact that there is no united narrative of Lithuanianness. And such a narrative is most likely unnecessary.

Karolina Bagdone is a PhD Student at Vilnius University and the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Lithuania. She is currently working in the field of identity studies and the reception of Western literature in Lithuanian poetry of the second part of the 20th century.

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