

EDUARDAS MIEŽELAITIS BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST: A WALK WITH WALT WHITMAN AND A HOWL WITH ALLEN GINSBERG

Summary

Eduardas Mieželaitis (1919–1997) is an important link in the history of Lithuanian literature and one of the most prominent figures in the poetry of the Soviet period. In 1962, he was awarded the Lenin Prize for his merit in poetry. Mieželaitis's creative path is a glaring example of what dramatic twists and turns literature had to take between the aesthetics and politics of those days, how it was trodden down upon and broken, and how it resisted and finally straightened up again. When in 1943, during the Second World War, Mieželaitis published his first book *Lyrika* (Lyrical Poetry), after the war he was strongly criticised for the 'bourgeois' picture of Lithuania depicted in the style of neo-romantic lyricism, and was instructed that if he wished to continue as a poet he had to depict Soviet reality based on urban rather than natural landscape. The mandatory symbols of that Soviet reality were to be factories, technology, and workers; in the village, they had to feature the collectivised land, the tractors ploughing this land, and happy collective-farmers. In literature, the landscape was declared a bourgeois relic and a key manifestation of nationalism and aestheticism. The method of socialist realism that was being introduced in Soviet-occupied Lithuania was anti-modernist in its essence. In some of its qualities (for instance, strictly regulated poetics) it resembled the classicist model of art, but in its declarations it demanded realism, which, it should be pointed out, was the realism of future socialism and communism. The arts with their means of expression were harnessed to perform the same tasks as Soviet ideology: to mobilise people for the building of communism. This change in aesthetics was executed top-down; it was fast and painful, implemented by persuasion and with the stick of criticism. The latter was quite effective. Bypassed by publishers for five years, Mieželaitis drew his conclusions and wrote three books in the pseudo-classicist Stalinist style: *Pakilusi žemė* (The Risen Earth, 1951), *Dainų išausiu margą raštą* (I Will Weave a Colourful Pattern of Songs, 1952), and *Broliška poema* (The Fraternal Poem, 1954). This imposed turning point in Mieželaitis's poetics is a vivid example of how the *context*, or ideology, was destroying and creating the *text* in the Soviet period. One can say that the evolution of Mieželaitis's

work echoes the drama of the change in the whole of Lithuanian poetry (if not the whole of literature) of that particular period.

Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's accession to power (1953–1964) launched the stage of conditional liberalisation of the Soviet system that had an immense impact on all spheres of life, including literature. This period is usually referred to as the Thaw. Eduardas Mieželaitis welcomed it with a personal rebellion against ideological dogmatism in literature, the extensive epic style in prose, and a declarative nature of poetry. In the collection *Mano lakštingala* (My Nightingale, 1956), the poet brought lyricism, the emotional and psychological aspects, individual themes, and a human relationship with reality back to literature. This victory of his was of great importance to the younger generation of writers (Justinas Marcinkevičius, Janina Degutytė and others). However, Mieželaitis did not stop at this boundary of traditional lyricism. In the late 1950s, the poetics of his poetry started changing yet again: his natural, miniature, emotional lyricism was gradually taken over by conditional images, a global perspective, a non-poetical lexicon from new spheres of life, scientific and technological concepts, and *vers libre*. The horizon of his poetical speaking encompassed the world, the cosmos, and global aspects of existence: peace, the atom, and challenges and prospects of civilization. These new poetical qualities manifested themselves in his books *Svetimi akmenys* (Alien Stones, 1957), *Žvaigždžių papėdė* (At the Foot of the Stars, 1959), and *Saulė gintare* (The Sun in Amber, 1961). The collection *Žmogus* (Man) was a compilation of poems from these three books by way of montage and was published first in Russian in 1961, and a year later in Lithuanian. This idea was thought up by the Russian poet and translator Boris Slutsky, who sensed the relevance of Mieželaitis's poetry, himself translated many of his poems, and picked a team of good translators. The project served the purpose and in 1962 the collection *Žmogus* was awarded the Lenin Prize, the highest in the Soviet Union, which meant that modern poetics was legitimised in the context of socialist realism. In other words, Mieželaitis charted the path for intellectual modern poetry in Soviet Lithuania, even if it had to be inevitably coordinated with the demands of the doctrine of socialist realism, formation of 'a new human', and the like. Modern poetry was making its way against considerable resistance. Both in Moscow and Lithuania, an intense struggle between the advocates of old poetry, the so-called conservatives, and the innovators who supported modernist novelties was going on. Supported by the poets of the younger generation Justinas Marcinkevičius, Algimantas Baltakis, Alfonsas Maldonis, and others, Mieželaitis was the standard-bearer of the latter.

In the eyes of ideologists, Mieželaitis's liberal enterprise in poetry was to some extent absorbed by the fact that he named the American poet Walt Whitman as his guiding star, and, judging by his reception in the Soviet Union, he was a rather suitable example to follow: the bard of working origins and democratic views, who wrote about liberty, equality, and integral world had already been internalised by such twentieth-century authors of left-wing ideology as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Pablo Neruda, and Allen Ginsberg. An important factor in the victory of the Lithuanian innovators was the support of the *shestidesyatniki* (the generation of the poets who made their debut in the 1950s), or the poets of the Thaw generation, in Moscow: Andrei Voznesensky, Yevgeni Yevtushenko, and Robert Rozhdestvensky. In the 1960s, Mieželaitis became a central figure in Soviet Lithuanian literature and achieved prominence in Soviet literature: from 1959 to 1970 he chaired the Writers' Union of the Lithuanian SSR and, according to the regulations, was a member of the board of the Writers' Union of the USSR; his work was much translated, while in the eyes of Soviet critics he was among the outstanding representatives of the literary process of that time. His poetical image of the 'new human' made him quite handy to the official criticism as it was an apt illustration of the 'Moral Code of a Communism Builder' developed by the new Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of 1961. The origin of the conception of the communist individual is essentially associated with the modern period, especially with the deification of the human that began in the Age of the Enlightenment: when the belief in the existence of the 'cosmic design' was rejected, its functions were delegated to the human. As can be seen from Mieželaitis's essayist texts, he was impressed by the romantic tradition of the myth of Prometheus, by rebellious creativity, and the idea of freedom that he saw in the work of Vincas Krėvė, Adam Mickiewicz (Adomas Mickevičius), Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Heinrich Heine, and George Gordon Byron. To them, the freedom of a creative individual was first of all a challenge to God and a contest against God, because a creative individual was himself like God. In his work, Mieželaitis elevated the human – the conqueror of the cosmos, a harmonious and Promethean individual of majestic social enterprise – to the centre of the Universe. At first sight, this hyperbolically magnified human can claim a place in the register of romantic heroes, to be on par with their great deeds, and the Promethean stance; however, the 'new human' does not have an 'opponent'. To him, God was replaced by 'Great Nature' that had already been conquered, mastered, and subjected to the human. He declares a harmony with matter, and he, a carnal human, is part of that matter; he declares concord with humanity (the

metaphor of the relation of a drop and an ocean), and accepts collective existence ('I' is identified with 'we'). In his poems, Mieželaitis creates a static anatomical picture of the human who is exemplary and perfect externally yet lacking in that individual spark and in independent energy for action. It seems that his human has nothing much to do in this perfect world, and he is just observing 'the cities with multi-storey blocks, [...] planes moving in circles round my head, / huge ships floating at my feet [...]'. We could say it is a version of a 'Prometheus' the conqueror, the end of history, and paradise on earth. Like nature, this human is eternal, immortal, and happy in his unconscious existence ('Lašas' / A Drop, 'Vardas' / A Name). He understands himself as material, as a continuation of matter, as a body obeying the laws of nature, and all this eliminates any dramatic aspect or dynamism. When drawing parallels between Mieželaitis's *Žmogus* and poems of the same title by Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Mayakovsky, as well as Whitman's *Song of Myself*, literary critics observed that Mieželaitis's book was dominated by pure pathos – the harmony of victory and the triumph of the new human, and that conveying such aspects was always more difficult than expressing rebellion, a dream, or a prophesy. Mieželaitis's poetry accentuates the human's natural genetics: identifying the body and blood with earth, rivers, and stones constitutes the core of his new metaphors. In this respect, Mieželaitis's book in this monograph is compared to the poem *Chelovek* (Man) written in free verse by the Russian poet and artist Boris Anrep (1916). According to the literary scholar Vera Serdechnaya, 'it offers an allegorical description of the re-creation of the human as an embodiment of whole nature. To accommodate the world, the lyrical hero of the poem slashes his chest with a sharp rock; animals walk into him, trees let their roots into him, and the celebration of the global unity is taking place'.¹ In Serdechnaya's opinion, Anrep depicts the universal return to the beginning and the coalescence of the world into the human, which is a painful process nonetheless. Meanwhile, the unity of the human and nature declared by Mieželaitis is lacking not only in the power of the subject-arbiter, but also in a philosophical foundation: it is superficially poetical, metaphorical, and the boundary between both spheres is most frequently recorded through a comparison. The equation sign between the human and other forms of matter, which corresponds to the model of the horizontal space, determines the total synonymy that can be considered one of the most characteristic qualities of Mieželaitis's poetry. At present

¹ Vera Serdechnaya, "Russkii Bleik" i Boris Anrep' [The Russian Blake and Boris Anrep], *Voprosy literatury*, 2015, September-October, p. 232.

it might appear unbelievable, but in those days Mieželaitis's *Žmogus* was raising suspicions as to whether this work could be attributed to the method of socialist realism. Ideologically vigilant critics found fault with the poetisation of the common human aspect, universality, and the cosmic element. The cosmic angle enables the poet to treat the earth as an integral common space, as an apple on the tree of the Universe, and the human as a drop in the ocean. Looking from this perspective, the social and class differences within humankind seem to have been pushed to the background. It imparts certain ambiguity to these poems: does the universality of the world encompass the whole humankind or just the 'socialist billion'? To reduce this ideological uncertainty, the publishers suggested calling the human a communist, and Mieželaitis agreed.

Still, the ideological concept of the new human in Mieželaitis's book was promoting modern poetics, and it became a manifesto of the communist ideology in the eyes of the readers. Much time will probably have to pass before the book recovers its aesthetic content. Mieželaitis's books of modern poetry *Autoportretas, Aviaeskizai* (A Self-portrait, Aero Sketches, both 1962) and *Atogrąžos panorama* (A Panorama of the Tropic, 1963) were much better received by Western-oriented young people of those days. In these books he reflected on and introduced the new poetic programme *a la* Whitman (the poem 'Niagaros krioklys, arba pasivaikščiojimas su Voltu Vitmenu' / Niagara Falls, or a Walk with Walt Whitman). In the texts of these books, Mieželaitis is both a poet and a critic: the object of his reflections is the creative process as such. Such processes of self-observation are a common phenomenon in modern art, but it was new and bold in the zone of socialist realism. The Soviet reader must have been suspicious of the lack of significance in the creative process. A number of texts seem to be stripped of a clearly-defined meaning or a poetic mission: it seems that the poet was just sketching in his notebook in his attempts to find equivalents for poetical, scientific, or daily language ('Einšteinas ir skutuvas' / Einstein and a Razor). Sometimes a poem develops into a discussion with the different-minded, and sometimes the poet subjects his own position to self-irony. In any case, most of the poems did not conform to the model of a poem imagined by the reader. In these books, Mieželaitis recorded his impressions from his numerous journeys abroad. During the years of the Thaw, he visited the USA, a number of countries in South America and Western Europe, and India; he socialised with Robert Frost and Allen Ginsberg. The places of writing – New York, Washington, Chicago, New Orleans, Buffalo – are indicated under his poems. *Atogrąžos panorama* is probably Mieželaitis's most avant-garde poetry book. In it, the poet for the first time employed the principle of the collage to merge

poems and 'aero novellas', poetry and prose, fragments of news reporting, original commentaries, self-criticism, phonetic improvisations, and associative *vers libre*. The texts are accompanied by abundant paratexts (comments, introductions, epigraphs, dedications) to help the reader to understand the texts. One is left with the impression that in this book the author felt absolutely free of all canons of genres and poetics. What the lyrical subject sees through an airplane window resembles 'the landscapes of an endless format' to him, while the changing views of nature are embodied in a variety of forms of artistic genres: posters, mosaics, architectural structures, and geometrical shapes, amidst which the lyrical subjects feels like a moving chess piece. This uncommon visuality probably determines the aesthetic life of the texts. A fair part of them are based on phonetic improvisations yet many of them did not transcend the level of an experiment. An impulse for *Atogrąžos panorama* might have come from Andrei Voznesensky's collection *Treugolnaya grusha* (The Triangular Pear, 1962), which Mieželaitis was editing at about the same time and which he highly valued. Both books were written after their authors' visit to America, both have a similar collage structure and similar motifs, and both poets attached importance to the phonetic arrangement of their texts.

Literary criticism was harsh towards Mieželaitis's *Atogrąžos panorama*. The overall atmosphere that prevailed after Nikita Khrushchev's rage against abstract art at the Manezh Exhibition Hall in Moscow on 1 December 1962 and the meetings of the leadership of the Communist party and the government with the representatives of the intelligentsia and the arts on 17 October 1962 and 7-8 March 1963 had a role to play. Following the Moscow example, a conference of art creators of the republic was convened in Lithuania on 4-5 April 1963, and modernists were criticised here as well. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the battle for poetics was fought with ideological arguments. Also, the Western aspect in Mieželaitis's book was not acceptable because of critical ideological tension between the USSR and the USA during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Therefore the internal review recommended the publishing house to abstain from publishing the book because the times demanded that literature should come close to the daily life of the Soviet people. Prevailing foreign topics and philosophical reflections on certain common historical and ethical issues in this collection could have been interpreted as the poet's withdrawal from relevant themes of Soviet life. Many could have blamed the poet for observing life out of an airplane window, of seeing just the stewardesses, the outlines of distant cities, and historical monuments, and of overlooking the workers – the builders of communism – toiling right here in the homeland. It is paradoxical, but

Mieželaitis, the author of the programmatic *Žmogus* who had just received the Lenin Prize, was suspected of cosmopolitanism and liberalism, of withdrawal from 'the revolutionary traditions of Lithuanian literature'.

With the illusions of the Khrushchev Thaw waning, the Renaissance image of the human lost its relevance and was replaced by the ordinary human and the poetics of simplicity. Meanwhile, Mieželaitis, passionately defending his programmatic *Žmogus* in his six 'anti-commentary' books – *Lyriniai etiudai* (Lyrical Etudes, 1964), *Naktiniai drugiai* (Night Butterflies, 1966), *Montažai* (Montages, 1969), *Horizontai* (Horizons, 1970), *Antakalnio barokas* (Baroque of Antakalnis, 1971), and *Iliuzijos bokštas* (The Tower of Illusion, 1973) – came to a realisation that he actually resembled Don Quixote fighting the windmills. In the end, the poet surrendered and decided to address the ordinary human of the daily life. He was about to write a satirical poem about a philistine society, a mundane and pragmatic human. However, such an object of depiction was alien to Mieželaitis and his romantic world-view, and did not stimulate his creativity. One could say that the poet coerced himself into keeping up with the times. He wrote the cycles 'Inflacija' (Inflation) and 'Standartai' (Standards), but it was a wrong path for a poet who wrote with pathos and baroque ornamentation. He was convinced that idealisation of grey mundanity resulted from certain intellectual weariness, scepticism, and disappointment. The poet, who looked at the world through romantic glasses, did not stop at the boundary of the 'norm' and started depicting the 'real' human, the representative of the consumerist society, with irony and caricature and to render him pathetic in other ways. 'Authentic roses and women lost value. / Nylon and sex came to bloom. / The steak and writing paper lost value - / Rhymed and prose text', the poet wrote monotonically. In those days, such poetry triggered a response: it was unanticipated and unexpected from a poet whose most characteristic poetic material used to be marble and whose human could touch the sun and the stars. Here it was sex, beards, drugs, abortions, and schizophrenia ... Still, just like Mieželaitis did not befriend the colour grey – even if he tried to get used to it at a particular time – the 'antipode' of the human was not a handy theme to him: 'Rob me of the faith in the human – / And my word will go out, like a star', he declared in one of his ironic cycles.

After the publication of the programmatic collection *Žmogus*, Mieželaitis was reproached for too weak a connection between his intellectual and abstract poetry oriented towards common human aspects and the revolutionary or national literary tradition. The poet had to reiterate, over and over again, that modernism and being part of a nation did not contradict one another and were

compatible. To prove his point, Mieželaitis prudently resorted to Lithuanian folk art (folklore, wooden sculpture) and, somewhat riskily, to the work of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (at the time the artist's work was also waiting for its full acceptance and the poet spent considerable effort on it). Folk art was treated positively in the doctrine of socialist realism: it was a result of the creativity of exploited people. Thus Mieželaitis defended the poetics of his experiment with the help of the acceptable status of folk art, except that his understanding of folk art was fundamentally different. He used to be outraged by the primitive approach to folk art and to national classics when, according to one of his interviews (*Interviu su rašytojais*, 1980), a villager would be popularly depicted as carrying an accordion wherever he went (he referred to stage adaptations of the works by Vincas Krėvė and Žemaitė). In songs, myths, and fairy-tales, Mieželaitis saw the rudiments of artistic means inherent in modernist art: free verse, associative metaphorical thinking, poetical ingenuity, serial improvisation, assonance rhyming, poetic aleatoricism, as well as a logical deformation of words that resembled the deformations in wood carving (*Mūza ir upėtakis/A Muse and a Trout*, p. 435). It was the examples of folk art that lay at the base of the poet's phonetic experiments.

With his work he proved that the tradition of Lithuanian literature was important to him. He surprised his critics with the book *Duona ir žodis* (Bread and Word, 1965) in which his field of vision was taken up by Lithuania and Lithuanian literature. Subsequent editions and reprints of the book (1968, 1974, 1978, and 1984) were renamed as *Čia Lietuva* (It's Lithuania Here). The book consists of fourteen portraits of the classics of Lithuanian literature written in a free impressionistic manner by stylising the manner of writing of his objects in prose and poetry, and by creating his own improvisations. In the critics' opinion, the sketches on Kristijonas Donelaitis and Maironis were especially successful. The book was immediately 'employed' by theatres and schools and actually became a literature textbook. It responded to the expectations of the literary community and earned Mieželaitis the title of the laureate of *Poezijos pavasaris* (Spring of Poetry) poetry festival in 1967.

Another guiding star in his poetic quest (not indicated directly due to ideological reasons) was the classics – and not only – of Western Modernism. In Mieželaitis's work, readers find themselves amidst writers, artists, musicians, and architects; in fact, they are submerged in an ocean of names and works of art and science figures, from the times of antiquity to Mieželaitis's own time. The poet treats them as contemporaries significant to him and his times. In his abundant reflections on the nature and essence of art, his relations with society, his du-

ties to the time and the reader, Miežēlaitis never referred to Soviet authorities. Instead, his books of poetry and essays abound in references to practically all classics of Modernism: Walt Whitman, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, and others.

Miežēlaitis was indifferent to the social dimension of the world unless it was part of cultural history. He was attracted by the structure of the world, the laws of the Universe, and cosmogony. He looked for such information in myths, the Bible, and in world literature. As for the reflection of his own time, he found it grey and uninspiring mundanity. The 'cosmic romanticist' tried to defeat it in his work: to poetise it and, in his words, to turn it into a fairy-tale. Secondary reality was Miežēlaitis's main creative material. To him, cultures of the world, artistic motifs, literature, the arts, music, and architecture were as powerful a source of inspiration and a stimulus for creation as nature was for the romanticists. To him, artistic creation of a genius had to be of a grand scale, of generalised and conditional forms, and with the power of vision and prophesy. He saw this kind of art in antiquity, in the works of the great masters of the Renaissance, and in the writings of the Romanticists.

Modernist poetics inevitably programmed a conflict with the ordinary reader because it was impossible to compare modernist art with the image of ordinary reality. This was rather difficult under the circumstances as in the doctrine of socialist realism the reader was an extremely important element: not only the object, but also the subject. The reader had to understand art: the popular nature of art was included among such other principles of socialist realism as party-mindedness, socialist humanism, a typical character, and a positive hero. The popular nature had to serve as a reliable cordon against the infection of Western Modernism. Miežēlaitis, who in his essayist texts emphasised the importance of the reader to his work, rebuffed public reproaches of the critics with such an argument: 'It is not the art that has to be reduced; it is the reader that must be enlarged'. Often the readers lacked the competence to cope with his works and they wrote them off to the experimental losses with an easy hand. Miežēlaitis's poetry demanded an intellectual reader, one who gave priority to ideas and not to emotions, who would enjoy the transforming relationship of art with reality, and who would be open to irony and humour. Those who rejoiced at the lyricism of *Mano lakštingala* (My Nightingale) approached the new poetry with reservation.

To Miežēlaitis, beauty was always the power that restored balance in his contemplations of the meaning of the world; the abode of beauty in a work of art is

the form the significance of which he consistently tried to embed into the doctrine of socialist realism. In those times, Mieželaitis kept asking a question that might have appeared strange: what poetry was and what it was not (*Monologai / Monologues*, 1981, p. 335). He created problems of things that appeared unquestionably obvious to others. There is also a different, 'dehumanised', attitude to creative work in Mieželaitis's reasoning. He speaks about composing poetry as a technical process, emphasises craft and production, and treats it as any other form of manual labour. On the one hand, such a de-sacralised approach to art looks very modern, but on the other, it can appear as a quotation from 'Soviet discourse': in its significance, manual labour is on par with the ultimate form of intellectual activity, creation. There is, however, yet another version and very likely it is closer to the truth than any other: following the example of the creative work of early-twentieth-century Futurists and Expressionists, Mieželaitis might have wished to add intellectuality to the traditional spirituality of art, to rationalise the perception of the creation of art, and to bring it closer to science. Many were outraged by his conception of creative work as an experiment and by the abundance of the concepts from exact sciences in his poetry. To legitimise his poetical quest, he resorted to parallels with laboratory experiments of technical sciences that were on crest of the wave at the time. In this quest, the aesthetic value was not the sole priority to Mieželaitis. When critics suggested that he should pay more attention to perfecting the form of his works, he would say he intentionally left some things unfinished and he trusted that time would make the right choice.

Mieželaitis defended the autonomy of art. He said that 'poetry has its own laws and even god will not change them' (*Montažai / Montages*, 1969, p. 158). To him, the metaphor, which embodied the imagined reality, substantialized a vision, and created a new world, was the centre of poetry. The gift of imagining was one of the central qualities of talent. With his standing he legitimised the possibility of the experiment in poetry paying special attention to the expression of a work: he enjoyed experimenting with the phonetic potential of a word, merging poetry with music and painting, and improvising (he tried the forms of the graphic and 'audio' poems). In Mieželaitis's work, the aspiration to synaesthesia can be seen as a creative programme. This kind of creative work, oriented towards the level of the form and expression, seemed to ignore the usual responsibilities of a Soviet artist: turning towards the environment, educating, teaching, enlightening. Mieželaitis voiced opinions contradicting the official position on a single artistic method.

In order to ensure at least some neutrality towards his modernist quests, if not support of the Soviet authorities, and to maintain his power in the literary field with Marcinkevičius's younger generation moving to the foreground, Mieželaitis adopted the tactic of a dual position: in his public speeches, papers, articles, and interviews (especially those intended for the All-Union reader) he was emphatically loyal to the ideological line, while in his creative work he attempted to be just a poet. However, certain intentional duality can be observed in his work as well: in my opinion, the motif of war and the books *Era* (1967) and *Gintaro paukštė* (The Amber Bird, 1972) dedicated, respectively, to the fiftieth anniversary of the October revolution and of the Soviet Union, play the additional role of a lightning-conductor. Such a position seemingly protected Mieželaitis's work that some found 'not Soviet enough' even after *Žmogus*. The situation became somewhat paradoxical: the ideologists found Mieželaitis's new poetry suspicious due to its form, and those yearning for modernism considered it to be too ideological. This paradox of duality, or the duality of modern form and socialist realist content, was hiding in his poetry and if we take a broader look, we will see that it was inherent in other arts of the Thaw period. Still, this diplomacy annoyed Mieželaitis because he felt restricted and forced to say what he did not intend. In the cycle 'Žiedavimas' (Ringing), Mieželaitis referred to his ambiguous situation of an art creator through the metaphor of 'a ringed bird'. '(I know...) I feel... Not nice... / For a bird to wear a ring... / but it's a bird and therefore it survived: / with the ring, although it's a shame, a shame...' (*Poezija*, vol. 2, 1968).

In the 1970s, Mieželaitis was already pushed to the periphery of the literary field: his books were still published but hardly read and intentionally ignored by the critics. In the 1980s, having published eight volumes of collected works (1982-1985) and two new books – *Postskriptumai* (Postscripts, 1986) and *Gnomos* (1987) – Mieželaitis seemed to have liberated himself from the ideological responsibilities of an official poet and from creative grievances, and devoted himself to what was interesting to him: aesthetic games with the form and meditation of his own life that was intensified by revolutionary changes in public life. Born in independent Lithuania, having lived most of his life during the Soviet period, he spent the last seven years of his life as a citizen of independent Lithuania yet again. These last years were not simple to the poet due to his health and his changed status. Nonetheless, they were creative years: he took up his diary and wrote six books, two of which – *Mažoji lyra* (The Small Lyre, 1999) and *Nereikalingas žmogus* (The Superfluous Man, 2003) were published posthumously.

Mieželaitis's writings of his last years of life reveal interesting things: we know that he kept aside from the *Sąjūdis* rallies and, it seems, did not approve of what was happening. Meanwhile, in his poetry of that period (*Laida* /The Sense of a Finish, 1992) he lived in the spirit of the prevailing public mood and took part at rallies with himself: his poems about Lithuania and Vilnius are brimming with patriotic enthusiasm, he remembers the destinies of the deported people, protests against the search for oil in the Baltic Sea and against the nuclear monster in Ignalina. In other books published in independent Lithuania – *Consonetai Elenai* (1994), *Saulės vėjas* (The Sun Wind, 1995), *Mitai* (Myths, 1996), *Mažoji lyra* (The Small Lyre, 1999) the poet no longer argues or tries to convince. He simply devotes himself to aesthetic games with the form, looks for new variants of the synthesis of the arts, creates for his own pleasure, and writes psychological love poetry. His lyrical subject does not declare: he meditates, reflects, and contemplates. The earlier 'white-black' juxtaposition is replaced by light and dark, and there appears the background of shadow. Once he rejoiced at the hero being a witness to the conquest of the cosmos, and now the joy comes from the lucky chance to have seen a live trout... Concord and harmony with nature, ecological issues, the possibilities of and conditions for the survival of the world, and existential questions became the central reflective axis in Mieželaitis's late creative work.

The answer to the question as to which part of Mieželaitis's creative work is the most significant for the development of Lithuanian poetry is unambiguous: the most important is his modernist work of the 1960s–1970s, which at the time was in the centre of the Soviet literary field and pointed out the direction to a number of new-generation litterateurs across the Soviet Union. At the time, his work was significant aesthetically and socially. It was rebellious and innovative, seeking new paths and signalling them to Lithuanian poetry. In the words of Sigitas Geda, in those days Mieželaitis was a breakwater of the Soviet literary field who simultaneously defended himself and attacked, declared his modernist avant-garde creative principles and brought them to fruition. He sought innovation in literature, tried out the possibilities of the synthesis of the arts, educated the reader (and literary critics) to accept collages of various genres, and 'discovered' the genre of the essay for Soviet literature. Then the poet brought back the form as such and consolidated its significance in art, legitimised the primacy of aesthetic reality over everyday life, and expanded the autonomy of art and the artist. Mieželaitis, who was an ambitious and egocentric personality, defended his own right and at the same time the right of other Soviet artists to experiment, to make artistic quests, and to err.

The position of the author of the monograph regarding the importance of the modernist period of Mieželaitis's creative work is not a matter-of-course: even in Soviet times, most of Mieželaitis's colleagues-writers (especially those of the older generation) were more in favour of his early neo-romantic work. They recognised his lyrical talent without reservations and considered the collection *Mano lakštingala* (*My Nightingale*, 1956) its climax. It seems that even today the reception of the poet's work supports this position (the popularity of some of his poetry collections and the regulations of the Mieželaitis Prize are indicative of it). This is not because of the traditional form of poetry that is familiar to the reader, but also because of his ideologically tainted image associated with *Žmogus*: it still overshadows his later books that were less ideologically engaged. This is precisely what even today hinders the appreciation of the value of Mieželaitis's work of the Soviet period and its significance for the Lithuanian modernists of later generations (Sigitas Geda, Marcelijus Martinaitis, Vytautas Bložė, and others). It was these authors who came to 'defend' Mieželaitis after Lithuania had re-established its independence and who highlighted his pioneering merit in the modernisation of Soviet Lithuanian poetry.

Finally, a couple of self-reflections on the methods followed in the monograph. The book was written by combining analysis of poetics with that of the components of the social environment, that is, by choosing the socio-critical methodological approach. A literary work attracted my interest not as much as an autonomous specific textual structure as a social communication. Mieželaitis's creative work was analysed with the contextual (biographical, public, social, and ideological) background in mind, all the more so because Mieželaitis was not only a poet, but also a figure in the field of power: a chairman of the Writers' Union, a member of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, a deputy of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR, and a vice-chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR. Analysis of poetics and components of the social environment in a single personality revealed interesting interdependencies, associations, and repulsions of the literary and power fields that also encompassed tensions in the relations between different generations, different subspecies of the fields (ideological and aesthetic), different stances, and tactics. With the Soviet epoch receding farther into the past, the title of the book might raise a question: what does 'the East' mean here? The antithesis of the East and the West, in which Mieželaitis was given the status of an active mediator, implies socialist realism and modernism. Analysis of the recep-

tion of Mieželaitis's work and reconstruction of the network of Mieželaitis's connections (both in Lithuania and across the Soviet Union) rest heavily on archival materials, current narratives of people who lived in the Soviet period, published and unpublished ego-documents (memoirs, diaries, and letters), as well as on research carried out by historians, sociologists, and cultural scholars.

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