

**POETS WITHOUT NATION:
(POST)SOVIET STRATEGIES
OF THE RUSSIAN AUTHORS IN LITHUANIA**

SUMMARY

This book has been put together on the basis of the dissertation “(Post)Soviet Russian Poetry in Lithuania: Strategies of Literary Praxis”, which was defended in 2012 at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. While preserving the key conception and structuring of the main chapters of the dissertation, the present text has been revised so as to take into consideration the observations suggested by the reviewers and other readers, new books as well as new ideas that have come to light since the manuscript’s submission for publication.

The need and possibility to explore Russian literature in Lithuania emerged after the country restored its independence and both Lithuania and Vilnius were rediscovered as historically multicultural spaces open to new research. The publication of *Russian Literature in Lithuania: 14th – 20th centuries* and *The Literature of the Russians of Lithuania. 19th century – mid-20th century* has also been symptomatic. Up until now most scholarly attention has been devoted to pre-Soviet literature in Lithuania produced in foreign languages; by contrast, this book moves towards an unprecedentedly comprehensive study of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian literature in Lithuania.

In the West, ethnic minority literature has long established itself as an independent field of research, but in Lithuania, as in Russia,

it is a rather new area of study, which is why it is expected to justify itself by providing qualitative (i.e. minorities are represented by *good* authors) or quantitative (there are many such authors and/or they constitute a significant literary phenomenon) arguments to ground its scientific relevance to philology. This study, however, in making use of the sociological approach and the premise that society has no irrelevant texts, refuses to select its research objects according to predetermined criteria of literary quality or “critical literary mass”.

For a while, the main ideological rival of traditional philology (i.e. philology that serves the national canon), which is concerned with the criteria of aesthetic quality, seems to have been popular literature and its “quantitative” argument. But the postmodern, postcolonial and decentred world has brought forth the significance of the *minority* argument alongside that of qualitative elitism and quantitative majority. Minority is foregrounded as an opportunity to gain a new and unpredictable point of view, a place which is perceived only from within, but which allows to observe that to which it remains invisible. This is why most researchers in this field are researchers-participants and this study is no exception – its author is part of the young generation of Russian authors in Lithuania.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet independent states saw the emergence of a new Russian minority. Its newness was determined by several circumstances. First, the Russian ethnic minority in the independent Baltic countries was a new phenomenon, which had no history of cultural reflection. Second, the self-reflexivity of the Soviet Russian diaspora was rooted in the mission of the preservation of Russian culture (or some of its forms), which lost its relevance after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Third, the new Russian minority was distinct from the traditional diasporas of other nations because the transformation from a linguistically and culturally dominant community into a community with a minority status

took place without the change of the place of residence. Another aspect, which distinguishes the Russian minority from most of the minorities of the postcolonial world, but brings Russians together with the Polish minority, are certain cultural ambitions and pretensions grounded in historical memory. On the one hand, post-Soviet national states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) were not interested in supporting the cultural prestige of the new Russian minority because in the collective consciousness Russianness was associated with Sovietness. On the other hand, after the Baltic accession to the European Union, paying attention to ethnic minorities became mandatory to the political life of the new states.

These circumstances, under the influence of various forces and the tensions they created, gave rise to the collective consciousness of the new Russian minority. The works of local Russian writers is a certain laboratory of this process, but it has more than social significance. The literary events of the recent decade – the establishment of the Russian Awards (2005) allotted to the Russian authors living abroad, the presenting of the NOS award (2009) to the Russian writer Lena Eltang who lives in Lithuania and the critical reflection on similar phenomena – show that Russian-speaking authors living abroad are expected to produce new writings, make extraordinary linguistic and existential discoveries seemingly suggested by their intercultural identity.

Thus, on one hand, post-Soviet Russian diaspora in the Baltic states and its literature constitute a qualitatively new phenomenon; on the other hand, its present state can only be grasped and made sense of by taking into account the prehistory of the structure of the literary field and its individual trajectories. In analyzing the strategies of various writers and publications, this book uncovers both the shifts in the literary field after the restoration of Lithuania's independence and the legacy of certain positions.

The first chapter of the book, titled “Theoretical Overture”, introduces the methodological premises of the research. It opens by discussing the concept of *the literature of the Russians of Lithuania* and its functioning in the works of other scholars and considers the literature of the Russians of Lithuania as a segment of the literary field which unlocks a special space of possibilities conditioned by the overlap and interaction of several national literary fields. Largely following Pierre Bourdieu’s works on the *literary field* and Pascale Casanova’s monograph *The World Republic of Letters*, this study extrapolates a descriptive model of the structure of the national literary field and discusses its adequacy as regards the Soviet and post-Soviet literary field. The later sections of “The Theoretical Overture” examine the concept of *literary strategy* (i.e. strategy of an agent of the literary field), which is central to this study, and present its interpretative model as well as its possible application, the narratives of success and failure, which, because of the ambiguity of the notion of success in the literary field, always remain incomplete.

The largest and most significant chapter of the study, “The Empirical Adventure”, consists of two sections, “The Soviet Era” and “The Post-Soviet Era”, both of which are organized along similar lines. First, they present the general context of the literature of the time, namely the configuration of the forces of the national literary fields (Lithuanian and Russian), their poles and conflicts. Subsequently, the strategies of two publications, which represent two different poles in the literary fields, are explored. With regard to the Soviet era, one of the publications under discussion is the periodical almanac/journal *Literary Lithuania*, which was published by the Union of Soviet Writers and disseminated the works of local Russian authors and translations of writings by Lithuanian writers; the other one is the single publication of the Samisdat almanac titled *Для своих* (*For One’s Own*) introducing in retrospect a fragment of

the unofficial literary space of the Vilnius of the 1960s and 1970s. In the post-Soviet era, the most significant publications were two as well: the Lithuanian Writers' Union's almanac *Вильнюс* (*Vilnius*) and the postmodernist online journal *Индоевропейский диктант* (*Indoeuropean Dictation*). Each of the two sections of "The Empirical Adventure" examines three literary strategies of the poets who represent different generations and sensibilities (i.e. positions in the literary field). The literary trajectories of the Soviet writers Jurij Dubasov (1910-2000), Jurij Grigorjev (b.1937) and Michail Didusenko (1951-2003) are interpreted as narratives of failure, whereas the post-Soviet literary trajectories of Jurij Kobrin (b.1943), Georgij Jefremov (b.1952) and Lena Eltang (b.1964) are recognized as narratives of success. Both sections conclude with a more general characterization and periodization of the role of the literature of the Russians of Lithuania at a given time.

The "displaced/dislocated" segments of the literary field, like Russian literature in Lithuania, usually have an ambivalent status in the national literary fields. With regard to the Russian literary field, it is a geographically and historically peripheral segment, while with respect to the Lithuanian literary field it has geographical and historical proximity, but remains a peripheral segment in linguistic terms. As it is, then, Russian literature in Lithuania gains significance when it is actualized as a border case of two cultural and national literary fields, a literary and cultural intermediary as well as a site of international literary space.

The Russian literature of Soviet Lithuania was influenced by the same metropolitan powers which affected Russian speakers and the segments of other republics in the USSR. The space of possibilities accessible to local Russian-speaking writers was usually limited to the activities on a certain literary border. This went hand in hand with the interests of the Lithuanian literary field (international dissemina-

tion and acknowledgment), which created favourable circumstances to follow this demand not only in formal terms.

The role of literary intermediary officially associated with the literature in Russian in Soviet Lithuania entailed a unilateral relationship: local Russian writers represented Lithuanian literature in the Russian literary field by way of translations and reviews; in Lithuania, however, they were not considered representative of the “great” Russian literature. Relations with the Russian literary centre – Moscow – were created directly and compulsory schooling in Russian language and literature facilitated communication. Because there was a great concern for the translation of Soviet Russian literature and the legitimate classics into Lithuanian, the writings by local Russian authors were considered provincial (before they were published in the metropolitan centre) and there was little interest in the local Russian literature in the Lithuanian literary field. This also has to do with the fact that there was no strong field of unofficial Lithuanian literature that would have forged links with the unofficial literature of other republics.

Although Russian literature in Lithuania was under the Moscow radar, it is not reasonable to claim that all the Russian-speaking segments in the republics of the USSR developed along the same lines. The Lithuanian literary field preserved its partial autonomy from Soviet Russian literature, which was possible because of the language barrier and the existent canon of national literature; in the Soviet republics where writing emerged only in the Soviet era, the situation was very different. This enabled local Russian writers in Lithuania, too, to make use of more freedom: the period of 1966-1968 saw the publication of a number of books (for example, poetry collections by Jurij Dubasov and Jurij Grigorjev) which would not have been published in Russia or any other Soviet republic at that time.

The Russian literary segment in Soviet Lithuania had the main trajectories characteristic of the Russian literary field, too: for exam-

ple, war writers, writers loyal to the government, “rebels” legitimated during the political thaw, semi-official writers-translators and the underground, half of which made their debut at the end of the Soviet era while the other half never stepped out of the backstage of culture. So much so that even Jurij Grigorjev was retrospectively discovered as the “local Brodsky”. However, this segment was more than just a structural miniature of the Russian literary field. Geographical location affected the writers’ identity and self-awareness; it welcomed a conscious and unconscious analysis of the problems of provinciality and the cultural frontier (the most outstanding example is the socio-cultural essays of Sergej Rapoport), as well as the decision to accept (like Georgij Jefremov) or reject (like Mikhail Didusenko) the role of translator and intermediary.

After significant structural shifts had taken place in the national fields in the late Soviet and post-Soviet era, the local dilemmas of the border elements remained essentially the same, although they gained new aspects. Once the space of possibilities had expanded, writers could not only accept or turn down the role of intermediary, but also choose the direction of mediation: for example, Lena Eltang does not translate Lithuanian writers and does not seek to represent Lithuanian literature (or the local Russian literature) in the Russian literary field, but having gained recognition in the Russian cultural metropolises, she is happy to represent “great” Russian literature. Georgij Jefremov, on the other hand, chooses to represent Lithuanian literature through translations and self-publications of translated collections and even though he has the symbolic capital of a native of the Russian literary metropolis, he refuses to position himself as a professional Russian writer.

Since the fall of the Soviet Empire the socio-cultural role of the Russian literary segment has not been well defined. Depending on the position of the elements in the segment, different and contradictory

self-conceptions have emerged. The structure of the segment is as multifaceted as the contemporary fields of Lithuanian and Russian literatures. New forces have gained pace: economic (market forces), technological (the Internet), and political (minority politics) forces, which restructure the dichotomies and tensions historically characteristic of this part of the literary segment, such as Soviet/anti-Soviet, professional/amateur, dominant culture/minority culture, etc. Although Soviet institutions have been abolished or transformed and writers' reputations have been reconsidered, certain mechanisms of legitimation have survived because those who have been legitimized by them seek to preserve them. These mechanisms are largely ignored by the writers who associate their identity with the unofficial or intercultural literary space.

The collective strategies of Russian writers in Lithuania usually have aspects of a minority or diasporic identity (the impact of financial support or other material resources necessary to groups and publications is not insignificant here), but individual members of the segment configure other, often unique, identities, seeing as they are less bound to institutions, programs and manifestoes. This is best exemplified by the story of *Индоевропейский диктант*, which uncovers a tension between the individual artistic project and a collective strategy, artistic license and the need to settle with the fund that provided material support.

Looking back on the manuscript and the final composition of this book, I am wont to note that the formal organization of the chapters has revealed certain unanticipated structural analogies. For example, the chapter that deals with the Soviet era opens with the analysis of the trajectories and strategies of Jurij Dubasov, while the chapter that deals with post-Soviet literature – with those of Jurij Kobrin. Although the writers represent different generations, concepts of art and literary destinies, both of them use the tactics of auto-

canonization and feel that the boundary between real literature and pulp fiction runs through them (literary institutions ignore Dubasov and Kobrin in his poems always fights with pulp writers that no other poet under discussion cares about). Their poetry has properties of journalese: it is socially engaged, oriented towards the “ordinary” reader and does not problematize the lyrical subject.

There is an evident parallel between the positions of Jurij Grigorjev and Georgij Jefremov: the works of both have won recognition from the professionals, yet have not made it into the limelight, partly because Grigorjev’s and Jefremov’s strategy entails avoiding moves that may be interpreted as a form of auto-canonization or self-promotion. Both writers’ professional attitude to literary activity and inclination towards a local identity, despite attempts to establish themselves in the “center”, have contributed to their identity as translators and intermediaries. As representatives of different generations and writers with different socio-cultural and political experience, they chose opposite routes during the political thaw: Jefremov took active part in the Reform Movement of Lithuania (Sąjūdis), while Grigorjev, offended by the nationalist spirit of the day, finally joined *Rarog*, a union of Vilnius artists, to publish politically motivated historical essays.

Readers of contemporary Russian literature are most familiar with the names of Didusenko and Eltang, whose unique creations have attracted the attention of other writers, critics and scholars. Both of them, although in different ways, have chosen to be professional writers, i.e. to make a living from literature, irrespective of the sacrifice it may demand. Although their identities have characteristics of interculturality, they transcend the boundaries of any given literary frontier. This is most evident in the case of Lena Eltang’s multilingualism, but Mikhail Didusenko, too, bases his image as a writer on Joseph Brodsky and Dylan Thomas. Also, both of them

are skeptical about literary translations (especially poetry) and ignore opportunities to translate Lithuanian literature into Russian.

The chapters analyzing collective and individual strategies have formed a gallery of literary positions, which may be read as a narrative about the development of the socio-cultural role of the poet. In the Soviet era, the writer had a privileged social status, which increased his confidence in his identity as an author. Poetry gained popularity during the political thaw, especially, and the repertoire of the positions of Soviet poets expanded. The image of the poet of the 1960s was different from that of the *ideological mouthpiece* as much as from the image of the *war poet*. This image attracted Jurij Kobrin and held off the nonconformist poets (they preferred the image of the *poet-martyr*) and semi-official poets (they usually practiced Aesopian language). Another position in the literary field inherited from the Soviet times, which unfolds in opposition to both the self-confident and governmentally supported poet and the nonconformist poet-missionary, is the refusal to think of himself as a poet even after having gained the status of a professional writer (e.g. Jefremov). This position suggests that the poet is more than someone who writes poetry or someone who has gained professional recognition. All of the latter positions are alien to most of the poets of the generation that made their debut after the fall of the Soviet Empire, who see the “poet” as a neutral, rather than an evaluative term.

Poetry is usually associated with inspiration rather than consistent work, so its grading scale usually has no division between genius and writer of doggerel. Most of the newcomers to the literary field first challenge themselves through poetry because the cultural prestige of a poet both in Lithuania and Russia has been very high. However, only a newcomer can be under the impression that writing poetry is the highway to the literary Olympus. In reality, the poet’s status in the literary field, especially in the post-Soviet era, when the

poet's prestige is no longer supported by the state, is very fragile in comparison to that of the translator or prose writer because the work of the latter has more characteristics of a craft and is respected (and paid for) as labor, whereas the poet has to reinvent his profession with each new effort.

The analysis of the strategies of Russian prose writers in Lithuania may specify some of the conclusions and may significantly contribute to the gallery of literary positions and local identities, but it is unlikely to radically revise the role of this segment in the literary field. In the “world republic of letters”, the national literatures of Lithuania and Russia are but small provinces and the Russian literature of Lithuania is only visible as if through a microscope (e.g. Victor Tshubarov, who lived in Soviet Lithuania, called himself a “microscopic Russian poet”). Nevertheless, the global space of literature is vast and any of its parts is worthy of attention because it brings us closer to the understanding of the laws that rule the whole.