

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

ISSUES IN SOVIET LITERARY ANALYSIS: RECEPTION OF THE WORKS OF EDUARDAS MIEŽELAITIS

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Two decades after Lithuania regained independence, increasing attention is being paid to the cultural legacy of the Soviet period. Recent years have seen new tendencies emerge in cultural studies of this era. Initial analyses focused on ideology: there was a search for criteria according to which it would be possible to identify and define forms of cultural relationship to the totalitarian regime, such as resistance, collaboration and adaptation. More recently, however, rather than considering the Soviet cultural legacy from an ideological perspective, there is a growing effort to find new ways to evaluate it by focusing attention on processes of modernization and the evolution of creative language. But these developments are marked by a certain tension, one that also applies to analysis of literature of the Soviet period. It is still thought that only authors who somehow resisted Soviet ideology are worthy of academic attention. Although analysis of their work would contribute to our understanding of the evolution of Soviet-era literature, the creative output of authors who in one way or another conformed to or collaborated with the regime is not generally included in the field of study. One such controversial author is the poet Eduardas Mieželaitis (1919-1997), who, while ideologically “inconvenient,” is important from the point of view of poetics. The goal of this article is to highlight the importance of the poet’s efforts to modernize Lithuanian literature, and to recall that he not only contributed to the creation of Soviet discourse but also initiated its deconstruction. This article could therefore be subtitled “Eduardas Mieželaitis: Creator and Dismantler of Totalitarian Discourse.”

When academic literary criticism examines the heritage of the Soviet period and analyses its creative processes, it cannot avoid Mieželaitis’ oeuvre. The poet, who won the 1962 Lenin Prize—the highest Soviet

honour—for his book of poetry *Žmogus* (Man, 1961), is one of the most representative cultural figures of the Soviet era. Mieželaitis was considered a modernist innovator not only in Lithuania, but throughout the entire USSR. Today, of course, he is presented as “the great propagandist” (Mažeikis 2008: 33), and his poetic cycle “Žmogus” (Man) is analysed as a “political-religious text” (Kmita 2007: 39). Of course, there is plenty in Mieželaitis’ biography and his writing to support such a view: he held high positions in the Soviet government (Deputy of the Supreme Council of the USSR 1962-1970, Member of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party 1960-1989, Assistant to the Head of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR 1975-1989) and an exclusive position in the literary world (Secretary of the Soviet Writers’ Union, Head of the Lithuanian Writers’ Union 1959-1960). But there is evidence in both the poet’s biography and his writing that can suggest another interpretation—one that, I hope, can complement rather than negate previous analyses and offer a more complex view of the context of his work.

Mieželaitis was drawn to a romanticised idea of socialism as a high school student in 1935, that is, before the Soviet occupation, and he clung to it to the end, despite the fact that he more than once suffered at the hands of his own people. The beginning of Mieželaitis’ career was especially complicated: his first two collections of poetry, *Lyrika* (Lyrics), published during the war in Moscow, and *Tėviškės vėjas* (Winds of the Homeland, 1946) were erased from official discourse during Stalinist times as not conforming to the socialist realist aesthetic, and for a good five years the poet was unable to publish and wrote only for children. As ideological rhetoric softened following Stalin’s death, Mieželaitis was the first to return to the song-like traditions of lyric poetry and produced a classic example of the genre in his collection *Mano lakštingala* (My Nightingale, 1956), which had an impact on all Lithuanian literature of the time. As Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930-2011), a great poet of a later generation, wrote in his *Diary Without Dates* (1981),

. . . the programmatic lines that Mieželaitis uttered bravely and with full force in the seventies—“It too has the right to live in a book / My grey nightingale”—no longer surprise anyone. But then, 25 years ago, they were a manifesto in the truest sense. These two very simple but passionately expressed lines marked the beginning of the rebirth of virtually all forms of national creative expression . . . (Marcinkevičius 1981: 157).

Marking the end of this stage of his career with that collection, Mieželaitis increasingly substituted free verse or syncope for classical

poetic forms, or combined them with passages of essayistic prose. The poet chose to write in forms that were unusual at that time, such as the sketch, the fragment, etudes and variations. In his poems, realistic subject matter was replaced by associative, conditional imagery and the technique of free montage; traditional poetic nature imagery was replaced by academic and technical ideas and bold, avant-garde improvisations. In reflective essays Mieželaitis stressed the idea of creativity as experimentation. Shifts in poetics are never limited to the sphere of poetry. According to sociologists of literature, “[w]riting in a different style always has political meaning” (Barbérís 1998: 153). Paradoxically, while Mieželaitis’ book *Žmogus* became a symbol of Soviet ideology, it also marked the beginning of its deconstruction. This was not, of course, a conscious effort on the part of the poet. I am referring here to his exploration of a new poetics—how his avant-garde innovations virtually exploded official literary discourse, and how the liberating quality of his creative language was felt by Soviet as well as Lithuanian artists. His new poetic language ideologically legitimated by the Lenin Prize, Mieželaitis went on to open the path for others. For example, when Andrei Voznsensky, the Russian avant-gardist and representative of the so-called “Children of the Sixties” generation, fell into Krushchev’s bad books, he was only able to publish his third book, *The Triangular Pear* (1962), when Mieželaitis agreed to be its editor and assumed some responsibility for it. Mieželaitis also helped one avant-garde Kyrgyz poet publish his book of poetry. Literary critics of the time such as Aleksandr Makarov and Vladimir Ognev

were virtually unanimous in their belief that Mieželaitis’ *Žmogus* was an important, in many ways essential, book for all of Soviet poetry. The fact that this work reinforced the conditional power of poetry—its ability to rise above illustrative description and naturalism—and the idea of synthesis that it embodied ... was one of the most important ideas of that era (Огнев 1963: 425).

After the publication of *Žmogus*, bold metaphors, visual montage and “close-ups” began to appear in Russian, Ukrainian and Kyrgyz poetry of the 1970s. In a monograph about Mieželaitis, Aleksandr Makarov is unequivocal about the poet’s role:

Mieželaitis did not only open up possibilities for Lithuanian poetry by taking it to wide new open spaces; today one would be hard-pressed to find a young poet in any of the major national poetries that make up Soviet literature whose creative quest was not inspired by this book . . . (Макаров 1966: 129).

Researchers of Mieželaitis will certainly have to return to the question of his role within the Soviet literary context.

In his search for a new poetics, Mieželaitis was influenced by Walt Whitman, as well as other early Twentieth Century Western avant-gardists such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Allen Ginsberg, Federico Garcia Lorca, Paul Éluard, Pablo Neruda and Robert Frost. He discusses his new poetic programme in the poem “Niagara Falls, or a Walk with Walt Whitman”:

This cascade of words
no longer fits
into the rhythms of chorees, anapests, dactyls and iambs
because they are too many—masses of words.
And other principles are needed to control them.
Their rhythm will be a flooded river (Mieželaitis 1962: 270).

Mieželaitis also drew on the experience of pre-war Lithuanian avant-gardists, creating figurative-spatial and phonetic poems, some of which were published in the children's magazine *Genys*.

The new poetics of *Žmogus* were “validated” by its ideologically acceptable content: the text's elevation of “man” to the centre of the universe and the poeticisation of his global social mission spoke to hopes for democratic change that arose after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the text almost became a manifesto of the official ideology. But the official canonisation of Mieželaitis' “man” certainly did not happen instantly. In Lithuania this poetry was at first received cautiously, with critics claiming that readers would not understand it. Complaints against the poet were even expressed to the authorities in Moscow, and not only for the fact that Mieželaitis' new poetry broke out of traditional syllabotonic structures. At the time, the common, abstract humanism expressed in the poems also seemed suspicious. In Mieželaitis' words, it was precisely for this reason that the publishers sought to cover themselves by proposing that his lyrical hero be presented as a communist at the end of the programmatic poem “*Žmogus*.” The poet agreed. In the first published version of the poem, in the book *Saulė gintare* (The Sun in Amber, 1961), there was no “communist” nor, for that matter, was there the title “*Žmogus*.” Later, with the exception of the two-volume *Poezija* (1968), the “communist” remained in all Lithuanian as well as Russian publications of the poem. “*Žmogus*” was not, in fact, either written as an integrated structure or an authentic cycle, and different poems that eventually contributed to it had already appeared in three books: most of them were published in *Žvaigždžių papėdėje* (At the Foot of the Stars, 1959), two in *Svetimuose akmenyse* (Foreign Stones,

1957) and several more in *Saulė gintare* (the Sun in Amber, 1961). Putting together this montage and publishing it as a separate book was apparently the idea of Miežėlaitis' translators, probably that of Boris Slutsky, who translated most of the poems and is listed as the book's chief editor. Indeed, the book *Žmogus* was published first in Russian (1961) and only a year later in Lithuanian.

At first, Miežėlaitis' new poetry was poorly received not only by ideologues, but by many of his older colleagues, including influential characters such as Antanas Venclova and Juozas Baltušis. But the poet's avant-garde innovations were simultaneously applauded by young scholars. For example, this is how Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, who is now a prominent art historian, remembers his youthful aesthetic awareness: "At the time we were most impressed by questions about humanity in general. We could say that the title of Miežėlaitis' book *Žmogus* was even anti-ideological: neither class, nor the social system nor nationality were important" (Sverdiolas ir Saulius Žukas 2007: 42). Andriuškevičius and his university friends, such as the poet Sigitas Geda, especially liked Miežėlaitis' 1962 book *Autoportretas. Aviaeskizai* (Self-Portrait. Plane Sketches). Published in the same year as *Žmogus*, this book was not as ideologically declarative and contained, according to the semotician Algirdas Julius Greimas, many elements typical of the spirit of the "Four Winds"¹ movement, both in terms of form and content (Greimas 1991: 479).

At the end of the 1950s, the world of the West opened up to Miežėlaitis. During visits to countries in Europe, Africa and Latin America, as well as the United States, Japan and India, the poet drank in the creative experience collected in the world's museums, and in his work recorded the architectural rhythms of big cities, the shifting face of civilisation, and the new sensations he felt looking out of airplane windows (c.f. *Foreign Stones*, 1957; *Self-Portrait. Airplane Sketches*, 1962; *Tropical Panorama*, 1963). This was a dynamic, expressive, youthful poetry that spoke about the achievements of art, culture and science. When asked about his relationship to ideology and literature during the Soviet period, the art historian Andriuškevičius commented,

. . . [W]hile we were in university Miežėlaitis made a big impression on both Geda and me. . . . In his poems ideology was either mixed in with other aspects, or was somewhere to the side. Around 1970 the dominant question was whether or not it was good art. Good art first of all had to be

¹ "Four Winds" was the name of a movement of avant-garde Lithuanian writers and their journal, published 1924-1928. [trans.]

modern—it had to be marked by abstraction, distorted forms, dramatic effect and shock value. It had to stimulate aesthetic emotions whose source was in some specific form. When one contemplates form, that supposed or real ideological engagement recedes. . . . We can say this about Miežėlaitis. We thought that “Airplane Sketches” was good in terms of form, and therefore generally good, and because it was good it immediately lost its ideological features.²

According to Andriuškevičius, throughout the 1960s Miežėlaitis was conducting a poetic experiment as he searched for a “synthesis of poetic forms.” He combined poetry and prose, traditional rhyme with free verse, essays with opinion pieces and personal commentary, and letters with critical articles, all the while extending their themes in his poems or poetic cycles. Over a decade he published six such hybrid books, and seemed to have almost forgotten the genre of the poem (*Lyriniai etudai*, Lyric Etudes, 1964; *Naktiniai drugiai*, Night Butterflies, 1966; *Montažai*, Montages, 1969; *Horizontai*, Horizons, 1970; *Antakalnių barokas*, Antakalnis Baroque, 1971; *Iliuzijos bokštas*, The Tower of Illusion, 1973). Miežėlaitis’ explorations were supported and continued by the generation of Justinas Marcinkevičius, Alfonsas Maldonis and Algimantas Baltakis, who, though they may have contested his concept of humanity in their own work, clearly recognised his contributions to Lithuanian poetry and their own poetic fates. As Sigitas Geda put it, “He literally flooded that emptiness [of Soviet-era poetry] with his writings—and if he did not himself do everything ‘right,’ then at least he opened the gates for those who followed him. Lithuanian poetic language became open to all global currents” (Geda 1999: 276).

When critics reproached him for presenting an excessively abstracted, idealised portrait of man, Miežėlaitis undertook to create his antithesis—an earth-bound, everyday human. But this approach bore little fruit, because this romantic poet did not stop at this definition of normalcy, but began to ironize, caricature and otherwise render this representative of consumer society pathetic. In the monotonous meter of the cycle “Inflation” Miežėlaitis writes,

Real roses and women are cheaper.
Nylon and sex have bloomed.
Steak and writing paper prices have fallen—
As have poetry and prose.” (Miežėlaitis 1973: 333).

² “‘Kaip manai, kas tu esi?': Alfonsą Andriuškevičių kalbina Arūnas Sverdiolas ir Saulius Žukas“, 41-2.

With their irony, sex, drugs, abortions and schizophrenia, these lines were surprising and striking to people who were used to a poet whose material had traditionally been marble, whose “man” had reached for the sun and the stars. But just as Mieželaitis did not himself turn grey, even if at one point he tried to, so his “antithetical man” did not turn out to be a suitable theme for him: “Take from me belief in man— / And my word will die like a star,” (ibid: 381) he declared in one of the poems from the series “Sketches of Antithesis.”

Also in contrast to this concept of Renaissance man in Mieželaitis’ writing are his translations of meditative fragments by an Armenian Catholic saint, Blessed Grigor Narekatsi. The poet called these fragments, which were published in his 1971 book *Antakalio barokas* (Antakalnis Baroque), “laments about the fate of man inspired by the medieval Armenian anchorite Grigor Narekatsi.” It is quite strange to find such laments in a book by this advocate of materialism and creator of a homocentric system, and they can be seen as a direct antiphrasis to his book *Žmogus*.

On October 3, 2009, the poet would have been ninety years old. A collection of his works, *Barokinė lyra* (The Baroque Lyre) was published on the occasion, while a book of tributes (*Post scriptum*) appeared in 2008. An autobiography completed before his death, *Nereikalingas žmogus. Akcentai* (An Unnecessary Man. Accents) was published in 2003.

Is anyone concerned with Mieželaitis’ poetry today, other than using it as an argument for ideological accusations and justifications? I think so, and this is reflected in the debates amongst some of the great Lithuanian poets of today (Aidas Marčėnas, Antanas A. Jonynas, Sigitas Geda) about what makes Mieželaitis unique and what should be included in a new collection of his writing. As Marčėnas writes,

From all of Mieželaitis’ writing it would be possible to make one book—not a very big book, but a good one. This is what Jakimavičius and Jonynas think. But what I find interesting about Mieželaitis is precisely that entire, unruly stream—as though some stachanovite weaver were working on six hundred and sixty-six looms. And it is miraculous what sorts of things are produced—one way or another, they are all works of art (Marčėnas 2008: 46).

Sigitas Geda is of a similar view:

In the past, when my colleagues have argued about whether it would be possible to pick out the best 50 poems from Mieželaitis’ entire legacy (some 50 books!), I have thought to myself that that is not the point—the deceased was a man of grandiose projects (Geda 276).

It will be interesting to see how younger generations, who are unfamiliar with that era and its signs, will read Mieželaitis' poetry. This crossed my mind once while reading an encyclopedia entry about Mieželaitis' life and work: "In the post-war era he was socially engaged and a member of the LKJS CK"³. In brackets, LKJS was identified as the Lithuanian Catholic Youth League. It should have read "Lithuanian Communist Youth League."

One can lament the fact that today's young reader does not know much about that historical context, but one can celebrate it as well. And it is perhaps not that important if, as a result, some communist-era texts remain mute.

In summarizing Mieželaitis' contribution to Lithuanian literature, I wish to stress his role in consolidating modernism in Lithuanian literature of the Soviet era, and in expanding its horizons in relation to the experiences of other cultures. In his poetry, which contains many reflections on world art (why critics sometimes called him a "tourist"), it seems as though Mieželaitis blurred the line conventionally made at that time between the worlds of the East and the West. He was interested in and concerned about global processes, about the future and fate of humanity as a whole. Perhaps this is why Saulius Keturakis, a young literary scholar, has called him Lithuania's first post-modernist (Keturakis 2003: 174).

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³ www.rasyk.lt/rasytojai/eduardas-miezelaity.html

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