



Rasa Balockaite

Between mimesis and non-existence

Lithuania in Europe, Europe in Lithuania

Cultural and political life in Lithuania is marked by what Homi K. Bhabha called an "ironic compromise", writes Rasa Balockaite. The Lithuanian is "almost a European but not quite".

After the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania found itself in a position that was hard to describe — the Soviet order was proclaimed to be a historical mistake, to be illegitimate and unjust, while the rhetoric of the independence period from 1918 to 1940 was tainted by nationalism and seemed hopelessly outdated and unsuited to the spirit of age. In other words, Lithuania had no vital tradition, no cultural meta-language that would have helped interpret the experiences of daily life in a meaningful way. Vytautas Landsbergis's phrase "We live in the ruins of culture" in a certain respect describes the concerns and hopes of that period.

To make matters worse, there was an absence of institutions operating on a normal basis. As Anatol Lieven pointed out, the satellite states of eastern central Europe at least had formal attributes of statehood; the Baltic states, however, did not have their own currency, armed forces, border control, diplomatic services, and so on. "Even with goodwill on the Soviet side, the task of separating Baltic institutions from centralized Soviet ones would have been a hideously complicated process."¹

The first years of Lithuanian independence were marked by confusion, obscurity and uncertainty. Social structures were undefined, institutions either illegitimate or non-functional. The rules and moral norms of daily life were unreliable. This frightening void, this vacuum of meaning, brought a longing for certainty and attempts were made to put social life into a more or less stable and predictable shape. One writer provides an oppressive image of the early 1990s:

An authentic present either does not exist or is not recognized; the past has been castrated by historians and the future can be reached only by walking in worn-out, battered shoes. How can one tame this oppressive uncertainty? By copying. Everything is copied. [...] The copied life is sickly like the moronic (in other words, postmodern) interiors of Café Gluosnis, tasteless like poor Lithuanian women made uniform by *Burda* magazine, like a copy of a haircut, a look, a gait, a theory, an artwork or an erotic act. It is terrible, and simultaneously lustful, a flirtatious non-existence, excitement for what is

absent, an illusion of certainty of the moment in the copying consciousness."²

How does society in the sociological meaning of this term rise from ruin, emerge from non-existence? Where do new habits, norms, and rules come from? How and which practices of social life are legitimized as "institutions"? In the words of S. Mestrovic, "[...] if communism is dead [...], what will replace it? The unthinking answer thus far has been, capitalism and democracy."³

The Soviet order was proclaimed as illegitimate and unjust and the "West" was announced as the new source of truth and legitimacy. The imitation and import of western social and political practices and institutions began. "The West structures everyday life. [...] It is the West — in its political, economic and cultural manifestations — which reproduces the conditions of life for the East."⁴ After the collapse of the Soviet system, Lithuania emerged as a partial subject; as unfinished, inferior, and marked by backwardness. Dominated by the hegemonic West, it sought to consolidate its status as a subject and win recognition. How could that be achieved? Basically, by means of voluntary westernization.

Lithuania orients itself to western models of market economy and liberal democracy and makes membership in the EU and Nato its top political priority; the discourse of return to Europe — the real home of Lithuania — is predominant in the mass media. However, having been isolated from the natural course of development of western countries for 50 years, Lithuania is taking over a system of values that is basically alien to it. Consequently, the feeling of abandonment, helplessness, and estrangement becomes more and more distinct. In the words of Gintautas Mazeikis: "Upon the collapse of the Soviet power, the new arrivals to the old Europe were met not only by the well-established fathers of democracy and liberalism, but also by their children, hungry for new views and meaningful modes of behaviour."⁵

Postmodern art, consumer society, pop culture, sexual liberalism, feminism, and family transformations characteristic of western countries — these often shocking experiences increase the disappointment felt by part of society at the so-called West:

And all this "literature", this spattering of excrement, splashing of slops, fucking and sex, presented in a refined way like a dessert after a big dinner, or vulgarly like obscene drawings in lavatories, this "art", splattered and mangled on the floors, walls and windows, this rock music, louder than machine-gun volleys, which moves the legs, tears the throats, and shakes off all human thoughts about duty, responsibility, decency, sacrifice — all that comes from the West, from America, from Dulles, from Hollywood, from the citadel of world democracy [...].⁶

Lithuanian society, or at least a considerable part of it, still nurtures outmoded early modern ideals about universal standards of beauty and goodness, naive sentiments of nationality, and nostalgia for the heroic past. In the West, this kind of attitude is considered immature, incomplete, and inferior, as an episode from the Swedish daily "Baltic Outlook" illustrates:

On enquiring of a Lithuanian official why there was hot water in summer but none in winter, one is likely to be met with a reply beginning, "You know, we were occupied for 50 years...", and ending, "We are Lithuanians, we do things differently."⁷

The poet and academic Tomas Venclova, who has been living and working in the West since 1977, asserts:

[Lithuanians] are fond of demanding that the West should sacrifice its interests for the benefit of ours. Certainly, we do not put it like that directly — we talk about morals and justice: how leaving the Baltic countries outside the Nato borders would mean "the moral decline of the West", and so on. The West regards it as childish behaviour, and not without reason.⁸

Venclova continues:

Eastern Europe is lagging behind from the viewpoint of civilization — partly for historical reasons formed over the course of centuries, and partly because of the unsuccessful "socialist" experiment that lasted fifty years. One should not worship this civilization lag and treat it as a sign of nobility or inner depth. Far more often, it testifies only to obscurity, sluggishness, and submission to cruel and limited patriarchal norms, which we tend to think of as national values or primeval goodness lost in modern society.⁹

To the "western consciousness", Lithuania's position represents something that lies beyond the limits of rationality; it is ungoverned by reason, but yields to naive sentiments. Yet how can legitimacy and recognition be gained? Via self-renunciation and rejection — authentic experience, sentiments, wrongs, feelings and convictions are suppressed and silenced, giving way to mimicry. A deep inner wish to be accepted and recognized results in the enthusiastic mimicking of western fashion, lifestyle, daily habits, values, ideas, and political language.

To borrow Homi K. Bhabha's term, this represents an "ironic compromise". Bhabha's postcolonial theory is for the most part based on his conception of "the mimic man", a figure whose identity has been suppressed and silenced, and who seeks status and recognition by mimicking the language and culture of the powerful — the colonialist. However, by imitating a language that is alien to him, "the mimic man" becomes alienated from himself and his own experience and finally acquires only a "partial presence", appears as a "partial self" and is "almost the same but not quite".¹⁰

The ambiguous and ambivalent situation of a "partial self" is well illustrated by the short story "The Mimic Man" by V.S. Naipaul (1967), whose main character, Ralph Singh, a Caribbean emigrant to Great Britain, confesses his experiences:

We pretend to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World [...] with all its remainders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new.¹¹

Some features of colonial mimesis can also be noticed in Lithuania's public

discourse. To rephrase Bhabha's "almost the same but not quite", one can assert that an eastern European is "almost a European but not quite". While seeking recognition, he tries to cross a certain threshold of consciousness, to suppress and silence his experiences and feelings, diligently masters good manners, listens to the "right" opinions, and chooses the "undoubted" priorities in order to be able to ape the European. He is a "mimic man", who prepares for a new and real life, seeking subjectivity and living in constant formation:

Lithuania's home is Europe. We're waiting to return there. But we must not return home as strangers. We must return as our own kin, as Europeans."¹²

If we wear foreign clothes, ride foreign cars, and listen to foreign advice, it means that we are constantly and daily becoming westernized.¹³

One can meet [in Lithuania] more and more people who speak several languages, who have a broad view of the world, who do not grovel before the East or the West, and who are by no means locked in a provincial shell of conceit, people who do not differ in any manner from confident, well-informed, and well-educated Europeans.¹⁴

Interestingly, even the permitted level of nationality is measured according to the Western standards. A. Vyzintas asserts that too little attention is devoted to the encouragement of national consciousness in Lithuania, yet paradoxically refers to Eurocentric arguments. Lithuanians, he writes, should nurture their national consciousness not only because they stem from a common culture and encourage a sense of wellbeing, but also, and especially, because that is what is done in Western countries:

[...] in Lithuanian schools, a negligent attitude to the teaching of the Lithuanian language prevails; we lag behind many western European countries in the quality of teaching the native language . [...] In England up to 75% of the total number of lessons in the history course is dedicated to the teaching of native history [...], the same figure appears in the curricula of state education of Norway, France, and the majority of western European countries.¹⁵

Having liberated itself from Soviet oppression, Lithuania has no cultural language and cultural tradition of its own, through reference to which it could articulate the experiences of daily life. Both the vocabulary and system of meanings of the Soviet period, and the nationalistic discourse of early modernity inherited from interwar Lithuania, are illegitimate, exhausted, and morally outdated. In seeking equal rights and recognition, Lithuania mimics western political and cultural language, a language that is basically alien to it. Mimicry permeates all spheres of life and acquires intimidating dimensions:

Lithuanian TV is saturated with and dominated by international entertainment commodities and locally produced imitations of popular American and European shows. Lithuanian pop music [...] is copied or literally stolen from the West. For instance, the most popular country singer, Virgis

Stakenas, uses the melodies of American songs, but replaces their lyrics with the texts of Lithuanian canonical poets [...]. Even stranger is Stakenas's version of "The House of the Rising Sun". Stakenas replaced its lyrics with the patriotic text of the nineteenth-century Lithuanian national poet Maironis. The original lyrics dealing about a bordello are transformed into a eulogy about Lithuanian dukes and knights.¹⁶

The mimetic nature of post-soviet Lithuanian society is also addressed in an essay by A. Zubrys, published in the daily *Lietuvos rytas* on the occasion of the sixteenth anniversary of restoration of Lithuania's independence. The author describes how Lithuanian "high society", having assembled for a long festive weekend in a luxurious health centre in Druskininkai, go all out trying to act European:

The restaurant offers Spanish cuisine and the cook has arrived from Barcelona; ice sculptures at the main entrance to the hotel represent the Eiffel tower, and guests are loudly sharing their memories about their visits to Paris, Turin, and so on, as if to signal to the surrounding people: "We're the citizens of the world". In their behaviour, they are trying to imitate, often awkwardly and ignorantly, what they happened to see in Gran Canaria, Milan, and Nice. A newly arriving family give their names at the hotel reception — the son of the Petraitis family is called Demianas.¹⁷

Demianas, a name very uncommon to the Lithuanian ear, has been popularized by the actress Liz Hurley, who called her son Damian (Petraitis is an unexceptionable and plain Lithuanian surname). To rephrase Bhabha, with the fictional personality of Demianas Petraitis, Lithuanian culture reaches the level at which it ironizes itself.

Mimicry and mimesis proceed from the desire to be recognized, to be accepted and integrated. Yet it is inevitably programmed to fail because of the inability (or lack of courage) to be authentic. The final effect produced by mimesis is a partial subject, a mimic man, who "tries to immerse (himself) into imported culture, denying (his own) origins in an attempt to become 'more English than English'".¹⁸

Lithuanians also seek to be more European than Europeans, as was perfectly illustrated by the celebration on 1 May 2004, the date Lithuania joined the European Union. Concerts and festive events continued for several, but the culminating moment was "The Action of Light". People throughout the country were asked to turn on all lights in their homes, offices, villas, and cars at midnight — satellite pictures were to show Lithuania as "the lightest state of new Europe".

What does it mean for Lithuania to be part of Europe and the European Union? Is it a natural fact of history or a happy coincidence? In the words of the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, "A tiger does not celebrate his tigertude". Membership in the EU, celebrated with such pathos, reveals Lithuania's ambivalent situation — a kind of inferiority, an inability to justify oneself, to ground one's existence and hopes in another and through another, in other words, through western Europe.

While seeking recognition as a subject of political and cultural dialogue with western countries on equal rights, Lithuania "imports" western social and political practices, models, and institutions. The western political and cultural vernacular is imitated while dissociating it from its "natural" context and ignoring shades of meaning and content. Through imitation, the meaning of the language is distorted.

In 2006, the Office of the Equal Opportunities received a report about a possible case of racial discrimination. A flower shop had offered its customers delivery of bouquets by a uniformed "hussar". Among the employees of the flower delivery service was a Somalian refugee, Thomas Aka Ikar. Customers' initially restrained reaction to the Aka Ikar changed after an advertising campaign made him famous; accordingly, his services were charged at higher rates. Though this trick was rather a gesture of goodwill seeking to retain the position for the employee, the Office of the Equal Opportunities announced that different rates had been established on the basis of skin colour and thus qualified it as racial discrimination. Aka Ikar himself had received this job through the mediation of the Red Cross Organization and asserted that he did not feel discriminated.

In fact, it really was a complicated issue — who was discriminating against whom? Were immigrants being discriminated against by Lithuanians, or were Lithuanians in Lithuania being discriminated by immigrants? Was there any discrimination at all? People's surprise upon seeing the *Other* was followed by openness, curiosity, and a good-willed effort to understand. Unfortunately, the use of the Western political language, distorted by mimicry, turned it into a case of "racial discrimination".

Mimicry and masquerade are born from the desire to be equal, accepted and recognized; nevertheless, mimicry does not bring us closer to the essence, it only creates empty masks and meaningless forms of imitation (Bhabha). What lies behind these masks? Nationalist sentiments and a secret nostalgia for the "golden age" of the early twentieth century; political passivity and the ennobled identity of a martyr arising from a painful historical past; bitter offence at the political passivity of the Western countries during the period of Soviet occupation; and so on. All that experience has been suppressed and silenced; besides, it cannot be expressed in a foreign political and cultural language. It is "a body of politics that refuses to be representative, in a narrative that refuses to be representational"; it is all that which is "necessarily rejected as beneath or beyond the system currently in force."¹⁹

And, finally, there is an attractively simple, but deceitful and misleading thought that could not be banished from this text, "Stop mimicking and imitating Europeanism and speak in your own authentic language". We would do it with pleasure, if only we knew what this "authentic language" was. Is it the nationalist imagination of the early twentieth century, with its uniform moral imperatives? Is it the authoritarian tradition of the Soviet period, which has left a mark of captivity and subservience in our consciousness? One feels tempted to cry out, like Otto Weininger: the secret is that there is no secret at all; there is no authentic language!

A mask is the sole form of reality that we know and have access to. There is nothing, or almost nothing, behind that mask — only formless inarticulate experience, which cannot be reflected upon and verbalized because of the lack of appropriate categories in the valid system of meanings. Thus, it is condemned to remain suppressed and without expression.

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 - ¹² A. Abromaitis, "Tavo rankose — Lietuva" [Lithuania in your hands], *Respublika*, 21 February 1990, 2.
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Published 2008–05–08

Original in Lithuanian

Translation by Ausra Simanaviciute

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First published in Kulturos barai 10/2006 (Lithuanian version)

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