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FACING THE OTHER IN LITHUANIAN PROSE: SAULIUS TOMAS KONDROTAS'S "THE SLOW BIRTH OF NATION"

DALIA CIDZIKAITĖ

University of Illinois at Chicago

[See Kondratas, ["The Slow Birth of Nation"](#) in this issue of Litanus.]

Last year, the Lithuanian translation of Edward W. Said's book *Orientalism* appeared on the shelves of Lithuanian bookstores. Twenty-five years separate the Lithuanian edition from its original. For Lithuanian culture, those twenty-five years signify a gap in Lithuanian academic thinking (except for those academics that live outside Lithuania), a vacuum, and an inability to appear on the map of postcolonial discourse. Only now are Lithuanian scholars beginning to discover and employ the new perspectives that Said's book has to offer on Lithuanian culture, history, literature, politics, allowing them to review the traditional ways of approaching particular subjects and problems, and to broaden and refresh their thinking. This article is one attempt to pay "attention to local topography, so that maps can become fuller" (Peter Hulme).

According to Vytautas Kavolis, culture consists of meanings that are important and crucial not to an individual, but of meanings that an individual shares and exchanges with others. The Other and its representations in the culture is one of those universal meanings. Establishing and defining the role of the Other in relation to the *Self*, realizing such binary oppositions as: "us" vs. "them," "s/he" vs. "I" are the most important issues that every culture has to face and to deal with. Although Kavolis points out that the importance of meanings in cultural history is determined by their significance to the culture in which they function and not by their relevance, paradoxically the importance of the Other in Lithuanian culture pertains as the latter. Recent questions on identity, Holocaust, racism, nationalism, globalization, raise the necessity to think of the Other, to look for the Other, to see the Other in Lithuanian culture.

It has been generally recognized by postcolonial theorists that the image of the Other is constructed by the dominant group. Usually the dominant group is considered to be a group of people that is, or only sees itself (the self-image) as one who has power over others. Power (political, physical, psychological, social power) is the critical factor that divides individuals, groups, nations into outsiders and insiders, "superior" people and "inferior" people, having less or more human worth. As Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson observe:

Whether they [members of the established group] are social cadres, such as feudal lords in relation to villeins, "whites" in relation to "blacks," Gentiles in relation to Jews, Protestants in relation to Catholics and vice versa, men in relation to women [...], large and powerful nations in relation to others which are small and relatively powerless, [...]—in all these cases the more powerful groups look upon themselves as the "better" people, as endowed with a kind of group charisma, with a specific virtue shared by all its members and lacked by the others. What is more, in all these cases the "superior" people may make the less powerful people themselves feel that they lack virtue—that they are inferior in human terms. (Elias, Scotson 1994, xv-xvi)

The established group tends to attribute to its outsider group as a whole the "bad" characteristics of that group's "worst" section—of its anomic (a state or condition characterized by a breakdown or absence of social norms and values) minority. The Other always has less human worth, is weaker in all respects. This kind of relationship is a two-way street—"[t]he representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer" (Richards 1994: 289). Not only is the Other given its constructing, fabricated image and identity; but by exclusion and stigmatization of the outsiders, the established group tries to define and

maintain its own identity as well. That is why the Other in postcolonial theory has been perceived as the alternative, the seamy side of the *Self*. Every culture, European especially, "gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient [...]", against the Other (Said 1979: 3).

One of the recent works by Lithuanian prose writer Saulius Tomas Kondrotas is a good example of the representations of the Other in Lithuanian culture. The very title of the short story "The Slow Birth of Nation" already outlines the main theme of the work—it is a story about the formation of a nation. Like the title itself, Kondrotas's short story is an abstract narration about the community of people that in the text is referred to as "we." The use of the plural pronoun clearly responds to the comments of colonial and postcolonial theorists, according to whom one of the specific features of colonial/postcolonial discourse is the so-called "mark of the plural" (Albert Memmi), otherwise called "depersonalization," "anonymous collectivity." In the case of Kondrotas, the depersonalized plural form is used to name not only strangers (Jews, Gypsies, handsome clean-shaven men, lovely women, dirty farmers), but the members of the "we" community as well. There are no names or individual characters in the text, only "us," "them," "Jews," "Gypsies," "people," "men," "women." Since there are no named references to any particular nation (except the last sentence in the text where the "we" community unexpectedly is given its name) that would allow the "we" community to relate to a specific nation or ethnic group (until the very last sentence all we know is that the "we" community lives in the mountains, about one hundred [at least that is what the Jews and Gypsies say] kilometers away from the sea), such a general character, despite the last sentence of the short story, allows us to view it as an allegory of the birth of any nation in the world.

"We" (the future nation) is a secluded community that lives surrounded by mountains where mountains are a nice, but very stereotypical, therefore a recognizable, metaphor for the withdrawal, the isolation, and the shutting themselves away from the rest of the world. The first sentence of the short story "We were innocent, like birds, and our virgin life was insipid and uniform, short of two seasons heavy with a prospect of change" (Kondrotas, 1) introduces the "we" community as a group of people that leads uninteresting, boring lives, with no chance for change. Two images—"innocent, like birds" and "virgin lives"—employed by the author in this sentence can be analyzed more deeply. The comparison of the "we" community to the innocent birds draws us back to Lithuanian romantic literature and Romantic literature in general; for example, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas's or Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius's works where birds (usually eagles and falcons) are symbols of courage, pride, disobedience, and longing for freedom. This allows the "we" community to appear not only as a group of innocent people, but also as people who are brave, independent, courageous, and proud. Saying that the "we" community is leading virgin lives makes another association—this time with the symbol of innocence in Lithuanian folklore, specifically Lithuanian folk songs, where one of the central characters—a maiden—is innocent, and pure. Thus Kondrotas's "we" community is perceived as having some feminine features (innocence and purity) that will be lost when they encounter the Other—the "superior" group of people who are more civilized, and educated. After their first encounter with the sea, they feel that

[o]ur pride suffered, too. Not used to such far-off skylines, we saw the world was huge, way larger than we had thought. In the face of this vast apathy, we felt minute and insignificant. We could be here or there all the same, we could rot in our villages in the mountains and nobody in this world would mind. Our mountains were alive with direct response to our presence there. We would say something loud and the words come back as an echo or even cause an avalanche. There was no echo here. As if we were suddenly mute. It hurt. (Kondrotas, 18)

Here the author's position is clear: such is the price of becoming a nation.

Some references in Kondrotas's text show that the "we" community shares quite a few stereotypical features typical of the Orient, the Other. The Jews that visit them every fall, around September, accuse the "we" community "of being too backwoods" (Kondrotas, 3), both physically and mentally. To Jews, the "we" community is strange and peculiar. They are different and not just different, but oddly different—unusual, fantastic, bizarre. The picture of the "we" community becomes more complete and complex: beneath the innocence (Ania Loomba argues that innocence is one of the most common popular stereotypical features that is attributed to the Other) lies not only pride, and courage, but such characteristics as: naivete; lack of intelligence; primitivism; economical, cultural, and social lag; and being an inferior group, or race in regard to others. The members of the "we" community do not speak much. If they have an argument with the strangers (very likely with each other as well), they solve it by fighting. The narrator clearly recalls the night when the Jews and the Gypsies told the men of the "we" community about the sea,

[...] for it turned into a bone-crushing brawl. The Gypsies said it was one hundred kilometers; the Jews insisted it's less, about eighty or something; and as for ourselves, we were completely lost, because what's a kilometer? The Jews accused us of being too backwoods, we didn't like that. Sure thing we aren't too worldly, but we aren't complete bumpkins either. The way you measure your distance doesn't necessarily make you a total rube. Or does it? So we had an argument about it, and the strangers lost. (Kondrotas, 15-16)

It is easy to notice that Kondrotas's "we" community corresponds more to a crowd than to a nation. There is no place for an individual in such a community, as Gustave Le Bon states:

[...] in a crowd, he [an individual] is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct. He possesses the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings, whom he

further tends to resemble by the facility with which he allows himself to be impressed by words and images—which would be entirely without action on each of the isolated individuals composing the crowd—and to be induced to commit acts contrary to his most obvious interests and his best-known habits. (Le Bon, 1952: 32)

Contrary to the traditional postcolonial view that claims that the Orient is feminine or feminized, the "we" community in Kondrotas's work is masculine (except for its innocence mentioned earlier). There are no doubts throughout the story that the "we" community is dominated by men and that this story is about them. It seems that the author takes a very traditional stereotypical stand saying that the birth, the formation of a nation is a matter for men, a kind of privilege given to them. They are the force and the muscles, the creative power of the nation. They are active, dominant, and heroic. When the time comes to make a trip (a feat) that will change the future of the community's life, that will give a different shape and understanding as to who they are and who they want to become, Kondrotas writes:

One day, unable to stand it anymore, we assembled, about thirty of us, all men, and walked down the mountains. It took four long hours on a bus stuffed with dirty farmers, their unshaven faces the color of earth that makes you envision a graveyard, smoking rank cigarettes and carrying live hens in their haversacks, good people, actually, all Christians who lose control and go mad only when their rotten teeth start aching; they asked us all kinds of questions and shared wine from their flasks. (Kondrotas, 17)

It is expected (and Kondrotas does not fail the reader) that some of the daily "rituals" of the community that lives in the backwoods of the world may seem a bit strange to the outsider. The short story starts with a detailed description of the activity that the community engages in every spring. Every spring, around March, the flood of the melting snow would carry away trunks and limbs of the fallen trees, stumps, and shrubs. Sometimes in the cavities and hollows of the trees they would find dead animals and, once in a while, human corpses. The "we" community follows its own rules dealing with the dead human body. First, they would be thoroughly inspected, their pockets searched for money and other treasure. Men's corpses were quickly buried before they started spreading disease, but women's bodies, especially if a woman drowned not too long ago and was young and pretty, would stay unburied for some time. This episode makes one more assumption about the "we" community. It is not only primitive, and promiscuous, but barbaric, engaged in necrophilia. The author also makes assumptions about the sexuality of the "we" community. For example, it is considered completely natural for the male adolescent of the community "to screw sheep." The "we" community is portrayed as being extremely exotic. A description may suggest various interpretations, such as that the "we" community is abnormal, fascinating, and even shocking.

The beginning of the short story is important for one more thing—it recalls one event that every member of the "we" community remembers, the event that shows the attitude of the community toward the Other. The woman whom they dragged out of the river and later buried in a shallow grave came back to life, somehow managed to break out of her coffin and dig her way to the surface. Naked and pale, she wandered from one house to another begging for help. Nobody answered her calls, nobody opened the door. The only man that sheltered the woman and soon married her was the one who dragged her out of the water. She gave him five children, they built a big house and never knew hunger, but, as the story relates,

[...] in the eyes of the community, neither the woman nor her children have ever been totally free of some stigma: first, she's never learned to speak our language fluently and, second, she's always been considered to be one of the walking dead, if only a bit of it. (Kondrotas, 13)

The word "stigma" in this context is very important—it may be interpreted in several ways: as a mark (here—a bad mark), a scar that you do not see, but always feel present, even an odor. But the main message is that she is different, she is a stranger in the community, and more—even her children and, very likely, her husband have to share her fate, i.e., to be strangers. The decision to welcome and to see her (and her children) as one of them is determined by how well she speaks their language. The ability to speak someone's language is crucial for both the outsiders who want to cross that line and to become a part of the dominant, established group and for insiders who, depending on how well the outsider speaks their language, will make their decision. Contrary to the appearance of an individual (although, as we see from the story, a woman's resemblance to the dead plays a very important role, too), language is a more complex—internal and external—factor in the relation between individuals, groups, and nations. You can change your appearance, but your ability to speak a language sooner or later will "betray" you—it will show either that you belong to the community whose language you speak or not. All that and the fact that the outsider is a woman allows us to draw one more conclusion: exclusion and stigmatization of an outsider by the established group (the "we" community) are powerful weapons used by the latter to maintain their identity, to assert their superiority, keeping the other firmly in his or her place. And finally, the last sentence of the paragraph leaves no doubt about the repressive nature of the "we" community toward the inner Other. It says: "To make sure it never happens again, now coffins are made strong and grave pits dug deep" (Kondrotas, 13).

To summarize, it is important to notice that the binary opposition employed by Kondrotas in his short story "The Slow Birth of Nation" is a reverse version of Said's opposition Orient vs. Occident. Although the "we" community in Kondrotas's work in many ways resembles the Orient as to its stereotypes and images, the "we" community is a dominant group; therefore, it has to be viewed as the Occident as well. Besides, the gaze of the narrator and the position that he takes in the story is of the "we" community: he is one of those primitive, barbaric, less-educated people. The whole story is told from the perspective of the "we" community that is oriental and occidental at the same time. This significant aspect allows us to

read Kondrotas's short story as a complex and atypical postcolonial text that invites readers and scholars to form its own and distinctive way of interpretation. And the nation that Kondrotas portrayed in his work are not Balts, but "smiling Macedonians."

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