

# LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 41, No.3 - Fall 1995

Editor of this issue: Violeta Kelertas, University of Illinois at Chicago

ISSN 0024-5089

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## AN ATTEMPT AT AN INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### *Excerpts*

ALGIRDAS JULIUS GREIMAS

*What did you dream of becoming in your young days? What were your liveliest concerns? What is the relation between the 'illusions' of your youth and their actual 'realizations'?*

Looking back it seems now that I was a normal youth and high school student of my generation who could already speak only Lithuanian; like everyone else, I wanted to overthrow Smetona and liberate Vilnius, I dreamt and looked for "the love that isn't", diluting all this with a rather thick feeling of Weltschmerz, or 'universal grief.

Our way to culture was difficult, without authorities, without markers. Neither the systems of human values, nor the ways of their assessment were clear. Some of us, students of the Rygiškių Jonas High School, set out to study foreign languages with the help of dictionaries: some chose French, some Russian, while I did German. Thus step by step and in a messy way did we reach the Great Inquisitor and the tear of an innocent child, count Bolkonsky whose eyes opened up on the battlefield near Austerlitz strewn with dead bodies, we heard Baudelaire and Verlaine for the first time, both in the original and in bad translation. All of this was mixed with quotations from Oscar Wilde, Ilya Ehrenburg, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. A self-educated student's hodgepodge before leaving to study in the capital.

Upon my arrival in Kaunas, I was before long coopted into a totally different 'community' formed, primarily, of the children of the Lithuanians who had returned from abroad — Riga, England or America. To an extent this colored my youth in hues of snobbism and cosmopolitanism. One should not think, though, that nothing else went on with Neo-Lithuania apart from drinking and the cult of the paradox; during the long, drawn-out mornings of hangover my reading list was filled with such authors as Trotsky, Spengler, Malaparte, Huizinga and others. So, adding to my literary likes, my formation now continued in the direction of an understanding of history.

So, you see, what 'illusions' and the possibilities for their 'realization' existed in Lithuania at that time: life seemed open, yet it was taking us nowhere.

*What was it that you brought along from Lithuania that later proved of particular importance to the development of your scholarly thinking? Did Lithuania prepare you well for your destiny? What significance did your teachers, spiritual movements and literature have for you?*

I cannot answer your question if it is to be understood as dividing my life into two isolated periods: one when I lived in Lithuania, was a Lithuanian and behaved as such, and the other when I lived in the West, in France, as a Frenchman. Such problems could be understood better in the light of the co-existence of two cultural worlds completing each other and opposing one another. I have spent all my nearly mature life as a schizophrenic. Both geographically and spiritually.

Probably I brought nearly everything from Lithuania: the Aukštaitian country smell of my childhood, my Suvalkian ambition and obstinacy, elements of German culture — in philosophy and history, — a Scandinavian and Slavic perception of 'spirit'; all of these things were incomprehensible to the nations of the former Roman Empire. And these kinds of cultural doubling sometimes provide perceptions of, in some cases, relativity, and in others, superiority.

Take particulars: our university was not that bad. At the Faculty of Law, the issues tackled- included, for instance, Kelsen's philosophy of law, the socioeconomic theories of Max Weber. The whole Faculty of Law was, of course, dominated (due to

his personal culture, rhetoric and elegance of gesture) by Rector Römer, a graduate of the Paris School of Political Sciences.

Another prominent figure that I took with me from Kaunas was Professor Karsavin whose whole audience at his lectures in medieval Christian philosophy were often just two of us, students of Law, Juozas Juodišius and me. "It's important," Karsavin would say, "according to the Medieval tradition, 'tres faciunt collegium' ". While listening to him I understood that Lithuanian can at the same time be clear and sophisticated, that is, 'cultured'. And later, when after some thirty years I visited the corpse of westernized St. Petersburg, led by a colleague from Leningrad, I felt how space can condition an individual, how such a city could produce a person like Karsavin. He was the most sincere and elegant scholar I have ever met; it must be in this way that ideal figures are formed which later help one to choose a way of life. Besides Karsavin I have met only one other person who spoke with such beauty and culture, but he was raised in another empire, Adorno.

Speaking of Teachers, I did not meet any in Lithuania, and my intellectual formation was based solely on self-education. Perhaps it has to be like that. True, at Grenoble I had a real teacher, A. Duraffour, a graduate of Leipzig, a splendid dialectologist. By literally Prussian methods he taught us linguistics, i.e. the old traditional and solid philology of the 19th century, smelling of the sweat of several generations of scholars, and while Kossu managed to remain a poet and Churginas a translator, it was not he or them who were to blame but life. I am grateful to him, who would often interrupt his lectures at the most important points and address me straightforwardly, "der erste Fuchs, merke das!", grateful for many things: for teaching me to persevere in boring constant work, for detailed analyses of texts, for an understanding of the systematic nature of language and social phenomena in general, and, most important, for giving me respect for scholarship and beauty. The names changed, but this system of values remained stable.

You were rather solemn in talking about my fate. With a smile on my face I will answer, yes! — if fate in this case is the accepted necessity to do what you must do but not what you'd like to do, if a person with a vocation for anything but grammar becomes a linguist, if all of his tastes and likes serve as fertilizer for foreign soil.

'Spiritual movements'? — True, my spirit moved, but it is not clear even to me where and how. I used to be a Neo-Lithuanian, yet I doubt that "love for one's motherland" could be called a spiritual movement: it seems to me that the members of Pavasaris loved their motherland less than the Young Lithuanians, while the provincials from Vištytis in Dzūkija wrote their letters to Smetona in blood, urging him not to surrender to the Polish ultimatum.

During the Civil war in Spain I admired the determination of the Catalonians and started considering myself an anarchist-syndicalist. During the German occupation, thanks to Hania Lukauskaitė, I drew close to the ideology of the Socialist Revolutionaries. Yet all this was just bubbles on the surface which did not involve any essential change. Today it is even impossible to grasp that intoxication, that craze which in the third decade of the 20th century embraced all the youth of Europe, that 'devil of action' which haunted everyone and urged one to action by any means, to do something, no matter what, break something at any price... A young person would become a fascist or a communist solely due to the environment or to circumstances.

Literature is, of course, a great thing. Everything is literature. Like many others, I was a great lover of night readings of literature. I have to note, however, that the Lithuanian approach to literature as one of the essential elements of 'general education' is characteristic of the search for what I would call 'the beauty of ideas', i.e. an ethics-based search for aesthetics. Moreover, that feelings and thoughts expressed in figurative language stick to the reader better than abstract elaborations.

Yet 'literature' is at the same time something opposite: it is a means of grasping or expressing an aspect of the aesthetic world. This is where a misunderstanding occurs: since literature, unlike painting and music, produces its aesthetic objects by means of words, every owner of several hundred words can imagine that he has the right to talk about it.

Unfortunately, it was only in France that I could start raising questions concerning beauty; the problems of production and perception of beautiful things probably continued throughout my whole intellectual life, yet it was only this year that I had enough courage to raise them publicly by giving the title "A Look at Aesthetics" to my seminar. Again, this does not signify any specific French influence, it's just a gift from God or push of Fate's finger — a meeting with people older and wiser than myself who had become my friends: Kossu, Churginas, Radauskas.

*Did there have to be a Europe, i.e. a break from Lithuania, years of life in Paris, the center of the European epoch, for your scholarly thinking to develop and bear fruits of creation? What did Paris signify in your intellectual formation?*

It seems that it's not only that my Lithuanian world does not come into contact with the French one, but that it is difficult to find continuity in the latter either. In the pre-war epoch I had planned to work on a doctorate on the pre-Celtic substrate toponyms of the Grésivaudan valley in the Alps: I had become a passable philologist. Yet after the war it was only little by little that I returned to linguistics, and the reading of Saussure resulted in more anxiety than problems to be solved or worth solving. I had to come across Merleau-Ponty who maintained that it was not Marx but Saussure who offered a model of history and of philosophy suitable for our era, and only then did I understand that I too was a participant of that cultural revolution. That is why my new approach to linguistics, without giving up philology, expressed itself as a progressive perception (*išjautimas ar įsigyvenimas*) of the new episteme.

However, my first appearance in French was a rather extensive review of Jurgis Baltrušaitis' *La moyen âge fantastique*. The author then complimented me on being the only one who understood what he had wanted to say. And as for myself, my Lithuanianess, my love for the Middle Ages and a new approach to history were satisfied in one go. However, this was a dead-end street, one of many in my intellectual biography.

My 'formation' continued in Alexandria in Egypt. While teaching there, next to the university, in a Catholic boarding school for girls, I learned about French history, geography, literature, I had a complete course in philosophy. In other words, being a teacher and not a student I finished, rather late, a French high school. This could probably partly explain my better integration into the French cultural world which at the same time allowed for more accessible and original contributions, it provided me access to problems from within, and not from without.

You were speaking about Paris and its significance to me. In fact, if one can put it this way, it was I who brought myself to Paris, and not Paris which brought something to me. Paris in those days of the 'European epoch', though it is that today too, was and is a center of ideas flowing into it from everywhere. It probably has the greatest concentration of brains in the humanities; besides the thirteen universities of Paris and as many so-called big schools, a great number of professors from provincial universities live in Paris. I don't know whether this is good, but a similar phenomenon perhaps can only be found in Tokyo.

Living in Paris, or being in constant contact with it, is a considerable privilege, if only with regard to the time saved: here, having met a friend or acquaintance in a cafe, one can in fifteen minutes learn about things which otherwise would have taken over three months of browsing in libraries to find it. Not to speak, of course, of the so-called Parisian 'nose' in the sphere of fashions in ideas and ideologies: in choosing a subject for a seminar, one can test each year whether one is moving 'forward' or 'backward'. Yet speaking about the changes in intellectual fashions would be a different subject which, nevertheless, does not digress too much.

Speaking about my life in Alexandria, I find it difficult to identify clearly what I found out or learned from reading and what I heard while listening and discussing. Our 'philosophers' club' in this typical French Mediterranean city gathered once a week in the home of Dr. A. Salama — I don't know whether from boredom or a search for knowledge — and discussed everything. First of all, of course, Marxism, as during 1940s and '50s one could only define oneself through the relation with Marxism, whether one was in favor of it or against it, partly in favor or partly against. The whole of our 'gang' — what we then were called — was dominated by Charles Singevin, the 'maître à penser' of both me and Roland Barthes who was then trying to combine, against the background of a universal, eternal philosophy, Marxism and Husserl's phenomenology. It was due to him that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty — but not Sartre! — became close to me. Among us, there were philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, literary critics and art historians, even pediatricians, in short, all sorts of professionals and semi-professionals. There could be only one subject common and acceptable to all — epistemology, the theory of the conditions of cognition which would allow one to understand the world and oneself. And there I was, a serious philologist and a Sunday lover of poetry, caught unexpectedly in the philosophical cyclones and hurricanes. The 'club' was active for seven or eight years; such things are only possible in Alexandria whose library, the largest in the world of the time, was burned down by some madman — or was it a philosopher?

This 'melting pot' of ideas should also include readings and discussions of readings. My real encounter — through books — with Levi Strauss occurred during the reading of his introduction to *Essai sur le don* by Marcel Mauss; it was a book which seemed to me at one time the most beautiful of all books that I had read, and the introduction by Levi-Strauss was like a flash of light having discovered the truth. I may be overestimating it in putting it this way, yet it was with this reading, or at least this is the way it seems to me, that the 'anthropological' period of my life started and is still partly continuing with my attempts at the reconstruction of Lithuanian mythology. This, of course, may not be the whole truth, as I had then known Durkheim, Lévi-Brühl and others for a long time. But it is not every reading that turns out to be a discovery; one reads and feels that there is meaning in the letters and the words, that there is meaning in understanding, that it is worth trying to understand.

Marcel Mauss then drew with himself the whole renewed school of anthropology (in French it was still called sociology then) leaving, at the same time, for Oceania with Malinowsky and Leonhardt; soon there came to Alexandria the sociologist Jean Margot-Duclot who had just returned from America, and brought together Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Kardiner, Levine, Merton... and so on.

The readings continued with André Malraux's *La psychologie de l'art* and the exaltation of the sacred world, with Bachelard's psychoanalytical dreams about fire and water and finally about space. The world had already been filled by significant figures when, talked into it by an Egyptian friend, I started reading the first important text by Lacan in the newly published journal *La Psychanalyse*.

In such a joyous atmosphere, the mixture of ideas where all extrapolations and homologations seemed possible leading to the formation of a global and coherent vision of the world, I constantly tried to keep linguistics as the operative focus of my attention and my world. This could only be achieved by extending Saussure along with the two main tendencies of European linguistics between the two wars — the movements and schools of Roman Jakobson from Prague and Louis Hjelmslev from Copenhagen.

*Name three or five personalities that were the most important in the development of your thinking? What did you find of special importance and closeness to you, in them or what was remote and unattractive? It would be especially interesting to understand the spiritual form of your close association with Roland Barthes.*

It is very hard to speak of the significance of living personalities in one's life: after all, they change, and you change, too, and the closeness of relationships is not constant either. However, first of all, I should start with my wife Ona Bagdonaitė. In such cases, though, discreteness is compulsory. The significance of women is extraordinary: it is they, and not men, who are able to decide what is important in life and what is not, what is honest and what is dishonest, what is worth undertaking and what is not. In this respect, a man is his wife's child.

The first important encounter, now on a plane other than the sensual or the moral, was the three years of breaking bread with Kossu. Older than me, he taught me to study what could be useful and not what one might like: linguistics and not literature. Due to him, I learned about —what I would term Russian literature or poetry — but what to a youth with intellectual ambitions maturing in Lithuania in 1920-1930 formed the general cultural horizon. I inherited from him, or so it seems, the complete emotional range of interpersonal relations, though under French influence we gradually turned to an aesthetic appreciation of literature (which of course in turn reduced the value of Kossu's poetry).

It was a completely different world that brought me together with Churginas and Radauskas. Churginas introduced a new classical dimension of culture, put my perception of culture into a broad historical framework, gave me a feeling for a cold, frozen beauty and the understanding of epic space which Kossu lacked. Perhaps Radauskas completed my sentimental education. Being not just a Lithuanian but a trans-Lithuanian poet he initiated into me a world of values, of quality, both in literature and in life. At least it seems so to me today, that after that I could try walking on my own.

With Charles Singevin, a new epoch began, the everyday friendship for nine years in Alexandria. He was both my and Roland Barthes's Teacher in the noblest sense. It was not just friendship but constant listening, conversations, discussions, assessments of everything, a breathtaking knowledge of all the histories of the world, all the humanities, mathematics, poetry, philosophy, mixed with a good portion of paradox, sex, folk songs of the Renaissance and *Drei Gröschen* opera — all of this made a semiotician out of me trying to understand culture as a universal homogeneous phenomenon. And now when I am writing a short introduction to his last work *L'Un et son Autre*, I cannot shake off a kind of reverential joy which brings that difficult epoch of life out of the mist of time.

The bonds with Levi-Strauss, in whose laboratory I spent some five years, were strange. I am grateful to him for many things, especially for the combination of strictness and poetry. He was a strange man whose friendship I desired but could neither express the desire nor attain the friendship. It is a big moral lesson which I am trying to apply to myself: man is not lonely, he is alone; furthermore, he is not alone, he is not there at all, he is just a sum of all his external manifestations.

Many people keep asking me about my relationship with Roland Barthes but it is difficult to say anything 'final'. Having met in Alexandria where we both found ourselves at • the same time, we remained close for some fifteen years. We were even friends, for we shared material problems, our families socialized, together we tried in the course of years to create semiology. Until this day I don't know whether it was he who 'discovered' Hjelmslev and Danish linguistics for me or I for him. You asked what the 'spiritual form' of this relationship was. Financial hardships, the search for 'workable' work, a conviction that you have something important to say but nobody is listening, then some recognition, discovery of common 'enemies' — these are all things which unite people. The 'revolution' of 1968 took place. Barthes was perhaps affected by it more strongly and in a different way than I. He went over to psychoanalysis somewhat, maybe even to Maoism, he became a famous writer. The meetings became more rare, the spheres of interests grew apart, both he and I were surrounded by our own students. His mother died. Then he died. Now we feel closer again.

*Translated by Arvydas Gaižauskas*