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THE BEST WAY TO LOVE OUR IDENTITY

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Exactly eighty-four years ago, on March 29, 1919, the French poet Oscar Milosz delivered a celebrated lecture on Lithuania at the hall of the Société de Géographie in Paris. His aim was more or less the same as mine today: to present to a European audience a small state, unknown to many, which after a long absence has reappeared at the eastern periphery of the continent and is striving to join the institutions of the Western world. Oscar Milosz himself was without a doubt a man of the West, an incarnation of fin-de-siècle Parisian bohemia, a friend of Oscar Wilde, Jean Moreau and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. But at the same time, he belonged to Eastern (or Central) Europe: his ancestry was so convoluted that I would say it symbolized the ethnic and religious intricacies of that region. Milosz's father was a Polish aristocrat (likely of the Serbian royal lineage), and his mother a Jew. He was born in the territory of what is now Belarus, which was then part of the Russian Empire. Although his upbringing was Catholic, in a traditional Polish spirit, he had a lifelong interest in Hebrew and Cabbala. He wrote only in French; historians of literature have placed him among the followers of Baudelaire, the "poètes maudits." But when an independent Lithuania came into being, this Pole, Jew, Belarusian or Frenchman chose it, not another country, and joined its diplomatic service.

His audience may have expected some diplomatic commonplaces, but it came as no surprise that Oscar Milosz's lecture promptly turned into a romantic, perhaps somewhat decadent poem, which since then has often been included in collections of his poetry. The writer said:

I sought at length for the source of the profound emotion which seizes me at the memory of this land, so distant and so long unknown to the West... The name of that land – Lithuania – took hold of my mind and emotions... I will take you on an imaginary journey to that hospitable land, shrouded in mist, and rustling... Behold, we now soar above this land, where every thing is the colour of faded memories. We are immersed in the scent of water lilies, the vapours of lush forests... A land lost in thought unfolds before us, a land whose cool, smoky sky holds the vitality of an entire primeval people. The honey scent of Lithuanian summers gives way to the smells of autumn, which is the very soul of Lithuania – a scent like a that of a fallen, mouldering tree, overgrown with moss, or of ruins after rain, when the summer is fading. A pale light glimmers through the vale; an ashen mist has shrouded the forests.

Lithuania then seemed an exotic land, almost un-touched by civilization, a kingdom of forests and marshes – the Unconscious of Europe, so to speak, teeming with primal chaotic forces, promising to endow culture with new energies, perilous, perhaps, but fecund as well. This idea of Lithuania is a traditional one in the West, much as my home-land was imagined by Herder and Goethe, later Prosper Mérimée, and finally Herman Sudermann and Johannes Bobrowski, whose books often end up in the suitcases of nostalgic tourists on their way to Lithuania. This, of course, is a mythical image. In 1919 Lithuania was a poor and backward country, but one already influenced by European and capitalist currents, with a few picturesque cities, dozens or even hundreds of commercial towns, and villages where novel industrial goods and publications were circulating.

Although a peace conference was underway in Paris, the German army remained stationed in Lithuania. But the Lithuanians were able to forge their own state, driving the armies of Lenin and Trotsky eastward. For twenty years between the wars, that state continued to exist in a perilous corner of the continent. Gradually, fitfully, but inexorably, it pursued its project – to become an inseparable part of Europe. And then, it vanished. The Europe of that time was a menacing place:

the two totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin eventually carved up the lands trapped between them. Lithuania together with the two other Baltic States fell into the hands of Stalin, then Hitler, then Stalin again. The consequences are not hard to imagine: the modest level of welfare achieved during the interwar years collapsed, the cultural elite of the country was scattered or subjugated, and worst of all, the Lithuanian people were ensnared in excruciating moral dilemmas. A much larger part than one would hope became Nazi or Stalinist collaborators. These dilemmas have not been entirely overcome even today, although a younger generation, destined to confront these dilemmas, is now coming into its own.

Some other Lithuanians, not an insignificant number, resisted both the Nazis and the Stalinists, or at least one of the two dictatorial powers. We do not forget those people for whom that resistance became the central focus of their lives. The last of them were those who defended the Parliament and TV Tower in Vilnius during the siege in 1991. For several decades, most Lithuanians felt bitter when thinking about the West. It seemed to us to be a space of freedom, tranquillity and prosperity that we could only dream about, though I should add that that image of the West was far prettier than the reality; at the same time we thought (and some still do) that Europe and the US betrayed us at Yalta and Potsdam. It's meager consolation that the West most likely could not have done anything else, and that its pragmatic but persistent policies in the end helped the East to regain its freedom. One way or another, all of this took fifty years – and what years they were!

During those years we were, or felt we were, forgotten. All of Central and Eastern Europe, seen from the West, appeared gray and monolithic, an expanse bristling with missiles and secret police, a monotonous wasteland, a great Nowhere, as if in a play by Alfred Jarry. Lithuania was one of the most desolate parts of that great Nowhere. Of course, we tried to imitate the West, we were proud to be considered “the Europe of the USSR,” just a tiny bit more free and diverse than the Soviet heartlands. We had jazz musicians, surrealist painters, translators of Kafka, Joyce and Borges. But nonetheless we lived in an anomic, insular world, and the consequences of lawlessness and isolation, among others, are vanity and inflated aspirations. Such a world is also an ideal breeding-ground for conformists and crooks.

Today, when I speak about Lithuania, I can hardly conjure up Oscar Milosz's romantic landscape. What I envision instead are faded and dilapidated cities; a countryside drowning in vodka and dotted with cinderblock hovels; denuded and litter-strewn woodlands; stinking rivers; monotonously landscaped farmland; useless factories. All of this, of course, is gradually getting better – alongside Belarus or the squalid region of Kaliningrad we don't look too bad; but we have no shortage of provincial imbecility, cynicism or corruption. It's not hard to see what follows from all this – the suicide rate in Lithuania may not be the highest in the world, but it is close. People have lost the work ethic and the inclination to work, which, to be frank, was not always deeply rooted in our part of the world in the past, either. Democracy is more or less functional, but awareness of human rights falls short – the understanding that all of us in this world are interdependent and that opinions are and must be diverse. In the eyes of [Western] Europe, our people are speculators in used cars, drug smugglers or prostitutes; or, at best, hired hands, waiters or nursemaids who are more often than not lazy, cowardly or insolent, concerned mainly – or only – with avoiding deportation. We had hoped that freedom and the shedding of soviet taboos would redeem our culture: but now much of our art is mere crude imitation of Western models, and not the best ones at that, while the rules of the market are making scholars and artists whine; although they did not like communism, they were used to having it pay their bills. In soviet times, we would lose sleep over the thought that our Lithuanian language and identity could be extinguished, as happened in the Middle Ages to other Baltic peoples – the ancient Prussians, Jotvingians and Galindians. I think that this danger was overplayed: the Communist rulers were more concerned about the obedience of their subjects than about how close their language was to Russian. You could speak Lithuanian, Georgian or Yakut, as long as you didn't deviate from the laws of Orwellian Newspeak. In any case, the Lithuanian language survived – but perhaps a few things of no less importance did not.

In his lecture, Oscar Milosz said, among other things, “A fatherland is like a human being: one must love it as it is, although it may not always be capable of inspiring love.” Many Central and East Europeans, including myself, could subscribe to these words – and, moreover, for better reasons now than in 1919 when they were uttered. We have to regard our situation soberly. But our complaints, which are characteristic not only for Lithuania, but also for Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and even more so for Romania or Bulgaria – and which those in the West are no doubt tired of hearing – should not become pointless whining. Joining Europe is difficult, but the signs are that we have the strength and potential for it. Lithuania proved as much by becoming the single most important catalyst for the collapse of the USSR. Lithuania had been pronounced clinically dead several times. In the twentieth century alone, our land endured six breaks in historical continuity, as occupation followed occupation, just as liberation followed liberation. A country which is able to rise from the dead like this commands some esteem.

As we accede to the European Union, we recall that Lithuania is not only one of the old nations of Europe, but also one of its old states. In the thirteenth century, it already existed in the same place and in roughly the same size as today – which cannot be said of France or Russia at that time, let alone Germany or Italy. Later, of course, that state underwent some peculiar transformations. By various means, some peaceful and others less so, it incorporated Slavic territories fifteen times its initial size, reaching the shores of the Black Sea, and becoming rather Slavic itself. Later, that medieval empire, called the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, entered into a dynastic union with Poland, and gradually fused with it into a single entity. At this point, it may be useful to remember another poet – quite a bit older than Oscar Milosz, but in some ways his precursor, who was born in the same region as Milosz and also lived in Paris. Both called themselves Lithuanians and were exemplary Europeans; both had a propensity for mystical visions. I have in mind Adam Mickiewicz, who wrote, “...a

great nation, Lithuania, united with Poland; two souls in one body. And never before had there been such a union of nations. But there will be again." If we like, we can read into these words a prophetic anticipation of the European Union.

In fact, some historians do discern in the Lithuanian-Polish union a distant prototype of twenty-first century Europe. That is probably an exaggeration, but nonetheless, the joint Lithuanian and Polish republic had some unusual – often novel and quite attractive – features. Its founders and citizens believed that they had created not only a powerful state, but also the best political system in the world. That was perhaps not the case, since the republic was tainted by serfdom, aristocratic profligacy and anarchy; yet it was distinguished by a fairly modern conception of civic rights (for the upper classes, at least) and by religious and ethnic tolerance that was remarkable for those times. It is sometimes said that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the joint republic, and especially its Lithuanian part, became the principal centre of liberalism in Europe: Catholicism and Protestant denominations (including the most extreme sects) flourished side by side, and Orthodox Christians, Jews and Muslims lived more or less undisturbed. Books were published in the European lingua franca of Latin, as well as a host of local languages (literature in my native tongue – Lithuanian – had its origins in this period as well). The University of Vilnius can also be described as a genuinely European institution; among its professors and students were not only Lithuanians, Poles and Belarusians, but also Spanish, Portuguese, Finns and Tatars. A little later it saw the spread of new universalistic ideas – of the Enlightenment, Freemasonry and proto-socialism. So that tolerance and multiculturalism perhaps have deeper roots among us than in many other places, although we are beginning to grasp this only now: the tradition of the joint republic was for a long time half-forgotten or entirely lost to memory, since Lithuanians felt a stronger connection not with the republic, but with an older period – the early Middle Ages, when their land was pagan and ethnically homogeneous.

This is probably not surprising, because modern nationalism, at least in Eastern Europe, takes language to be the most important feature of national and state identity. And in the joint republic the Lithuanian language, although it was not banned or suppressed, played a secondary role and eventually almost disappeared, like the Celtic languages in Ireland, Scotland and France, or the Sorb language in Germany. Both Adam Mickiewicz and Oscar Milosz considered themselves Lithuanians: Mickiewicz contributed more than others to the formation of a modern Lithuanian nation, while Oscar Milosz defended its interests in the diplomatic arena. But neither of them ever learned Lithuanian; they knew about as much of it as Joyce knew of Gaelic. It revived in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and far more successfully than Sorb or Gaelic. It was regenerated by linguists, philosophers and poets who had appropriated the ideas of Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. The names of these romantic patriots – Lithuanian linguists, philosophers and poets – are almost unknown outside my country, but for Lithuanians, including myself, they are sacrosanct. The fact that we have created a sizable and estimable literature in our own language, together with universities, theaters, radio and television, is a cornerstone of our self-esteem and sense of our own worth. We were able to preserve this infrastructure of national identity even during the Soviet period, though then, to put it mildly, it did not always serve the real needs of Lithuania. Any nation, as sociologists these days know, is an artificial construct, but like the larger nations of Europe, we were able to construct something functional and even organic. The Lithuanian ethnic myth seems to have been generally benign, though that is not always how it turns out.

But a sort of trauma remains in our society from that time when the Lithuanian language almost became extinct, and even more from the Soviet years, when great efforts were made to protect it: for many, it seems dangerous to enter into unions with other nations and to Europeanize. There exists a group of thinkers who revere Lithuanian singularity, traditional folklore and the pantheistic worldview which reaches back to the pagan age, and who believe that Europe (and even more so the United States, of course) is a deadly threat to these cherished values. I'll give one somewhat comical instance of this. The demand to reject the Russian ruble and to return to the interwar currency – the litas – played a significant role in the struggle not only for economic autonomy but also for the emblems of nation and state. The new banknotes, which depict notable personalities who bolstered the Lithuanian language, culture and identity, will soon have to be replaced by non-Lithuanian notes, that is, the euro. Some see this as an attack on our singular identity, although as far as I know no one has protested against the euro – maybe because they are, after all, more appealing than rubles.

Romantic myths have given rise to authoritarian tendencies, and still do (such tendencies are associated, not without good reason, with Vytautas Landsbergis, leader of the Lithuanian right). Even worse, they sometimes give rise to territorial claims and demands for "ethnic purity." Ethnic diversity can lead to conflicts, but in a democratic order these conflicts are not difficult to manage; the yearning for ethnic purity forever is, as we know, the threshold of genocide. Historically, this desire has on several occasions impelled Lithuanian society towards dead ends and even crimes. Fortunately, all of this seems to have bestowed on many of us some degree of immunity to nationalism and chauvinism. There is no danger that the atrocities of the Balkans could be repeated in Lithuania (although there have been moments when I have greatly feared this). And in general, the right-wing isolationist forces that were very active in our country ten or twelve years ago have clearly lost out to the forces favoring European integration.

I am not one of those who favor homogenization and who surrender in the face of the common denominator of mass or postmodern or globalized culture – call it what you will. Such surrender is especially painful for a poet, because it does violence to language, which is the poet's only tool, and often his only property. Love for one's particularity, for one's own tradition and symbols is perhaps somewhat anachronistic in this time, but then anachronisms often serve a purpose, and embellish the world. But I think that the great fear for the survival of Lithuanian identity is unfounded. It's not possible to destroy a culturally entrenched and active nation. Those poets, philologists and thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries resurrected it for good. That fear is a kind of inferiority complex, although Lithuania has proven its mettle more than once, and demonstrated that it is no less worthy of esteem than its neighbors, or any other country of Central or Eastern Europe – or for that matter of Western Europe.

But in the world of the future, in an integral European community, those aspects of our tradition which until now have appeared secondary will gain special significance. Just as with ethnic tradition, these are, and will be, somewhat mythified, but that is not necessarily harmful. We have two cities with a long multicultural history. First, there is sacred, baroque Vilnius, one of two capitals of the old joint republic, an eccentric, capricious, mosaic-like centre of culture, in its diversity of languages and religions even reminiscent of ancient Alexandria. Second, there is Klaipėda – that city of craftsmanship and industry, partly Hanseatic and partly Scandinavian, belonging to an entirely different cultural orbit, smaller and less significant than Vilnius, but now becoming a centre of liberal and tolerant Lithuanian thinking. Other towns and regions must align themselves with these two centers, while at the same time developing their own multicultural potentialities: for instance, Kaunas, the interwar capital of Lithuania, is essentially also a cosmopolitan city with its early twentieth century buildings, architecturally somewhat reminiscent of Geneva. In Soviet times, the reappearance of regional differences was a form of protest against Communist homogenization, and shook the regime; I think that this process could become even stronger in a unified Europe. Rocky, hilly, obstinate Žemaitija; Sūduva, with its fertile plains, which gave us the most celebrated minds of our national revival; Aukštaitija, with its lakes and its poets; Dzūkija, concealed in its forests; the delta and dunes of the seacoast – all of this was and remains integrally part of Europe. When we are Europeans not only in word but in deed – in other words, a self-reliant, self-critical people who respect the Other, able and thirsting to grasp our own essence in conjunction with traditions that are not our own – then, more than ever before, we will be Lithuanians as well.

Translated by Darius Čuplinskas