



## Book Review

***The Dedalus Book of Lithuanian Literature.* Edited by Almantas Samalavičius. Sawtry, Cambridgeshire: Dedalus, 2013. 249 pages. ISBN: 978-1-9092-3242-6**

Nineteen texts comprise *The Dedalus Book of Lithuanian Literature*. Between its covers, we find the work of Soviet-era emigres, post-Soviet and Soviet-era writers, Jewish Lithuanians, and Ukrainian Lithuanians. Amongst the chosen authors and their texts, displacement appears repeatedly as a theme. Indeed, exile, loss, and invasion are central themes of Lithuanian contemporary (and not-so-contemporary) life.

As far as I can tell, the collection's primary organizing principle is chronology: the anthology begins with what was written first and ends with those texts penned last. We start in independent Lithuania of the 1920s with Vincas Krėvė, pass through the Holocaust (very briefly via Iščokas Meras), Nazi concentration camp experiences (Balys Sruoga), mass Siberian deportation (Sigitas Parulskis), late-Soviet gloom (Ričardas Gavelis), and end with the current generation of writers of the reestablished Lithuanian state (Birutė Jonuškaitė and Danutė Kalinauskaitė).

Given that no expert in Lithuanian literature (i.e., anyone who could read the collected texts in the original) is likely to pick this book up for any reason other than to teach from it, we must assume that the collection hopes to serve as a snapshot of Lithuanian culture and writing for the unacquainted. If this is indeed the case, I suggest that the collection is in need of some framing. A reader will undoubtedly be left wondering, as I was, why this or that particular text was chosen; why this or that author? Are these the "best" pieces that the Lithuanian language has to offer? Are they the most "representative"? And if so, what or whom do they represent? Does the order signify a sort of progression? If so, where to?

After an initial read through the anthology, and with these questions in mind, I returned to its introduction to see if there were any clues that I'd missed regarding its frame, philosophy, and architecture. In short, I was looking for a moment when the editor might state plainly what he was trying to do when constructing this book by pulling these particular pieces and arranging them in this particular order. I found the following:

This anthology attempts, admittedly fragmentally and without laying claim to any panoramic vision, to convey the more essential developments in Lithuanian literature over the last few centuries, a period that was closely connected to the evolution of statehood - its creation and loss - and the quest for freedom and independence. (19)

The concerns here therefore appear to be sociopolitical (i.e., how literature reflects the societal changes amidst which it is created) rather than aesthetic or even literary.

But for me, questions of form and genre remain. Little attention is given here to artistic development or difference. Indeed, it seems to me that this anthology may have been more aptly titled "The Dedalus Book of Lithuanian Prose," rather than "of Lithuanian Literature," for amongst its texts we find no poetry, no drama, no folklore or song. What we find is prose: mostly short fiction, with a few pieces of nonfiction slipped in almost without comment. In fact, a reader unacquainted with Lithuanian history and culture would likely have difficulty distinguishing the fictional from the nonfictional texts presented. It matters (at least to me), for example, that the two excerpts of Balys Sruoga's *Forest of the Gods* come from a memoir, since a reader must consider testimony differently than a novel. It would have been helpful to know before diving in that Giedra Radvilačiūtė's "Obituary" was an essay, since essays work according to a particular set of ethics and have different concerns than do short stories.

Of course, English-language literary communities are far more genre-conscious than those of Eastern Europe. In North America, we writers of creative nonfiction have been engaged over the past fifteen years or so in a debate surrounding the genre's limits, rules, and defining principles. From a Lithuanian perspective, I imagine these conversations may seem absurd (literature is literature, after all), but it seems to me that in translating texts, we must also think about who our intended readers are and how those readers will understand what we present. Texts, whether fictional or nonfictional, may indeed record the sociopolitical development of a culture, but they can also do other things: they play with language, ask questions about memory and the nature of reality, stage internal dramas, have conversations with other writers across time and space, experiment with and invent new forms, and so on. Readers might be curious to know what concerns Lithuanian literary culture might have besides the loss and reestablishment of statehood.

Finally, there is another question regarding who is gathered between the covers of the anthology. Since 2009, an American organization called VIDA ([www.vidaweb.org](http://www.vidaweb.org)), whose mandate is to "address the need for female writers of literature to

engage in conversations regarding the critical reception of women's creative writing" in the United States, has produced what it calls "The Count." VIDA's Count Director Jen Fitzgerald describes the process thus:

Women from across the country dedicate thousands of combined hours to perform an arduous task: we manually, painstakingly tally the gender disparity in major literary publication and book reviews. We do this to offer up concrete data and assure women authors (and wayward editors) that the sloped playing field is not going unnoticed.

The results, presented as pie charts and circulated widely via social media, have been sobering, and a number of prestigious magazines and journals have begun to adjust their editorial practices as a direct result. So, after five annual VIDA Counts coming across my Facebook feed, I couldn't help but notice the huge gender disparity in this collection (fifteen male writers vs. four female). On this imbalance, editor Almantas Samalavičius writes:

An important characteristic of late Soviet-era literature was the marked increase of women writers in a literary domain traditionally belonging to men, and along with them new themes pushed their way into the literary sphere. Women writers paid more attention to relationships, revealed the dominance of male philosophies and stereotypes, and wrote about the fate of women and other Soviet-era realities with a more subtle hand that sparkled with new colour. (17)

That Lithuanian women's writing has been traditionally overshadowed by that of men should, of course, come as no surprise. And while I appreciate Samalavičius addressing the paucity of female voices in his collection and in Lithuanian literary history so directly, I wonder if he may have been too quick in deciding that no pre-late-Soviet-era women (the first female-penned text we encounter is Jurga Ivanauskaitė's 1985 "Year of the Lily of the Valley") deserved a place here. I was struck, for example, by the omission of canonical pre-Soviet and Soviet-era female writers like Saloméja Nėris, Žemaitė, Šatrijos Ragana, Janina Degutytė, Ieva Simonaitytė, and Dalia Grinkevičiūtė. Samalavičius, a scholar far more well versed in Lithuanian literature than I am, could doubtless come up with even more feminine names. Interestingly, six of the seven translators presented in this anthology are women. Whether this fact says something about contemporary Lithuanian culture, I don't know.

Still, the guts of this book are good. All the translations are competent and readable. I will admit to a personal preference for late-Soviet and post-Soviet texts, so the second half of the collection picked up considerably for me. Standouts included: "A Cry in the Full Moon," Juozas Aputis (translated by Medeinė Tribinevičius); "Tūla," Jurgis Kunčinas (Elizabeth Novickas); and "The Murmuring Wall," Sigitas Parulskis (Jayde Will). The text is clean and well edited. It was a pleasure to read such high-quality English translations.

***Julija Šukys***