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Wendell Mayo, *In Lithuanian Wood*. White Pine Press, 1999.

In Lithuanian Wood is an ambitious fiction asking fundamental questions about what it means to embrace the other. The book is engaging on many levels: as an experiment using the conventions of American fiction to render foreign experience, as a thick description of post-communist Lithuania, and as the dramatization of a desire not simply to understand Lithuania, but to be changed by it.

Like many other American fiction writers, Mayo does not invest in an extensive plot. Rather, he seeks to reveal his evolving relationship with Lithuania through the juxtaposition of seemingly independent stories, the sudden shift of point of view, and an imaginative reinvestigation of personal experience. Mayo makes the variety of stories cohere by repeatedly returning to the main character, Paul Rood, an American teacher in Lithuania, and his dialogue with a Lithuanian interpreter, Vilma. Vilma's task is to help Rood with his mission to translate Walt Whitman into Lithuanian. However, when the novel begins, Rood has already lost interest in this mission and is, instead, trying to learn from rather than teach Lithuanians. Again and again, we find him trying to coax the reserved and reluctant Vilma into telling him yet another story. But Vilma's stories, sometimes folk tales, sometimes minimalist autobiographic fiction, sometimes both, unwittingly create for Rood a sense that Lithuania is to be penetrated and experienced at some deeper level.

Mid-novel, Rood still thinks that Vilma can somehow provide access to this level. He tries to do it by trading stories. For his wacky, surrealistic adventure tale of travel in Lithuania, Vilma, more realistically, recounts an experience from her younger days as a Young Communist camp leader in charge of a difficult child, Maironis.

"Do you believe my little adventure story?" the American asked her. The interpreter lifted her eyes from her lap, from a new assortment of clover leaves she'd collected there all the while she'd listened to the American's story. "Yes, I believe it. "

The American looked puzzled and began to fan the pages of his book again. He stopped. "Why?" he asked her. "So much of it seems so senseless, like words just lying around waiting to be picked up. "

"I agree, " the interpreter replied, "but that has nothing to do with it. " Her gaze fell to her lap. "I believe your story, " she went on, "because I want you to believe my story about Maironis. "

The American reached around and stuffed the book into his back pocket.

"Almost time to go, " he said, smiled broadly, and sat back down next to the interpreter.

"You seem very satisfied, " the interpreter said.

"I am, " the American replied. "I have made an incredible bargain—my unbelievable adventure story for your very believable one. "

"And so, Paul Rood, you think you have made a very nice profit?" She looked straight at his eyes. Her eyes changed to gray, steel. "What do you call this adventure of yours?"

"I don't know, " the American said. "There are too many possibilities. What would you call it?"

The interpreter rose to her feet; the cloverleaves spilled from her lap back onto the grass; and her eyes remained on his, dead center. "I would call it, " she replied, " The Adventure of the Lunatic. ' " (138)

By the end of the novel, we see that Rood does not profit from the bargain. A greater exchange replaces the exchange of stories: Vilma ends up in Chicago, and the bitter Rood remains alone in Lithuania.

So we have traded places, you and me. Don't you see how mysterious we are? Isn't it funny?—you, so unreasonably faithful living in the land of the faithless?—me, so reasonably faithless living in a land of faith?—and we say the suffering's over, all over, the Soviets are gone and it's all over.

It is not over. The Soviets are gone, but now I have come to sulk in my Birštonas sanatorium, my pit (207).

It is a tragic ending in the Shakespearean sense. After proving that he is the one American who does more than "come into the circus ring awhile" and then run off, after proving that he too can match her in suffering, at the very moment, in other words, when Rood is ready to better understand Vilma and her people, he irrevocably loses her.

Mayo's attention to Rood's fall from innocence makes the novel primarily a tale about Rood rather than Lithuania. And yet the more Rood emerges as an individual, the more I am taken with his epiphanies about Lithuania. Less interesting are the moments when Mayo gets heavy-handed about being an authority on Lithuania rather than on Rood. For example, when in the opening chapter Vilma treats Rood to a folktale inspired by a dead animal in their path, Mayo injects the idea that the Soviets have left their mark on everything. "This animal, " says Rood, "this thing... the Soviets... all this means something, doesn't it?" At least for the reader acquainted with Lithuania, the idea will evoke recognition, but not revelation. It's the sensitive but goofy, spontaneous but attentive, egocentric but well meaning Rood that we can trust to give us an albeit subjective, but honest and fresh response to Lithuania.

For the most part, Mayo manages his own knowledge of Lithuania deftly. There are fine selections of poetry and song lyrics woven into the stories or used as interludes between the chapters. The novel is most impressive, of course, when it avoids an abstract approach and allows the details of Rood's experience to invoke the Soviet damage. One of my favorite chapters is "Key Keeper, " where we get to see Rood through the eyes of a guard at the dorm in which Rood resides. The "Key Keeper" is baffled and disgusted by Rood's "American" behavior—his daily showers, his loud behavior, his hoping to get by without knowing the language. A bit of a sadist, he enjoys making Rood follow the senseless rules of the dorm that were created during the Soviet period. The clash between the two characters is delightful and illuminating.

The Pope is coming... So in His honor, this summer we started our Oriental Massage Service at the bendrabutis. You would think this would satisfy our Western visitors... And wouldn't you know it?—the first of them to want this Oriental

Massage Service is Paulius Rudis! So here he comes, smack, smackity. He says in his bad Lithuanian, "Massage. Let me have it?"

I give him my standard dumb look... one second two, three... enough—"Oh... M-A-S-S-A-G-E, " I mimic the sign in English. Then in Lithuanian, "Yes, I will let you have it. "

I get the keys, open the basement door, then the fire door down there, then the door to the basement *dušas* (excuse me, I mean, Oriental Massage Parlor). I tell this Paulius Rudis, "Get into the massage parlor. "

But of course he doesn't understand, so I tug at the towel he has wrapped around himself until he begins to move the way I want him to, like a moo-cow, into the massage parlor. His eyes are moo-cow wide. I put my hands out, palms down— and lower them slowly to say, "Sit!"

So he sits. By now his eyes are two white globes, almost popping out of their sockets. The massage apparatus is attached to the wall, wound around a special iron spool. Nearby, a sign reads,

GAISRO ATVEJU IN CASE OF FIRE

I take the massage apparatus off the wall, grip the brass nozzle firmly with one hand, open the valve, and give this Rudis his massage. What could be more simple? And he seems to enjoy it, such groans of ecstasy, such writhing and howling, WOAAHH! WOAAHH!

The fool must have been holding his breath because he begins to turn blue, and I have to shut off the Massage Apparatus. I ask him, "How are you supposed to get the full benefit of this treatment if you keep holding your breath?"

But of course he doesn't understand me. He cups his hand over his shriveled American balls; then he spreads his towel out on top of a workbench in a corner where old spiders have made little tents with their webs, corner to wall. He lies belly-down on the towel, closes his eyes, and his arms flop over the sides of the bench; they swing a couple times limply, back, forth, then just hang there. Imagine it! Did he really think I was going to touch him? (41)

We can appreciate Mayo's unsentimental view of his main character. The humor is dark and gets darker—Mayo is not out to paint a pretty picture, but one that rings true. We can also appreciate the fact that Mayo uses the same unflinching eye to view "our" Lithuanian culture. He takes on topics that are often more difficult for

us to approach. He provides sanctuary for characters who hold up the bones of murdered Jews, who don't find salvation in the West, who refuse to divide the world cleanly between Soviet and liberated Lithuania. Ready or not, Mayo has, as Crèvecoeur did for America, opened up our culture to wider interpretation.

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