

Vilius Ivanauskas, *Įrėmintą tapatybę: Lietuvos rašytojai tautų draugystės imperijoje*, Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2015. 472 p. ISBN 978-609-8183-04-7

Heated discussions were still taking place in Lithuania recently on how to examine Soviet-era literature (for example, in 2013 the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore hosted an interdisciplinary scientific conference ‘How Should we Talk about the Soviet Period?’). Today, we see that discussions which highlighted the need for newer methodology and interdisciplinary research have already become practice: in 2015 alone, several books were published in one form or another about Lithuanian culture, literature and writers from the Soviet period. Vilius Ivanauskas’ book *Įrėmintą tapatybę: Lietuvos rašytojai tautų draugystės imperijoje* [A Framed Identity: Lithuanian Writers in the ‘Friendship of Nations Empire’] is one of them.

The fact that a historian is boldly entering territory that is traditionally the domain of literary researchers should not come as a surprise. The writer was a distinctive figure in the Soviet years. On one hand, in terms of cultural production, society at that time was undoubtedly literature-centric. On the other, as the monograph’s author notes on more than one occasion, the writer was afforded a special, ideological role as an ‘engineer of souls’. In other words, during the Soviet period, partial autonomy in literature was limited (in the Stalinist years, it was practically nil), while the influence of the political field on the literary field was very strong.

Ivanauskas’ book does not just give an analysis of the Soviet Lithuanian literary field, as an intersection of the literary and political fields, ways in which the political field affected the literary field, and the latter’s structural response to that impact. In the view of the author, this response is most evident in writers’ social trajectories, and in their relations with the so-called friendship-of-nations empire.

Having chosen this path, the writer’s main activity and its result, a work of literature, which to use Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological terms, is one of the main dispositions of the writer’s position in the literary field, basically disappears from the scope of research. On one hand, this is an understandable methodological step by the historian, to limit himself to that part and aspect of the literary field in which he feels most competent. On the other hand, when reading the book, the question arises, when speaking about writers’ trajectories, or even reducing them to social or political positions, is it still possible to do without an analysis of their work? Does their work participate in the formation of these trajectories, and if so, how?

Ivanauskas himself acknowledges that in a study of writers' trajectories, it is totally impossible to ignore references to what they wrote, how they wrote, and how they were read and viewed in the public domain. To that end, the monograph does contain some general descriptions of their work, or at least the themes they wrote about. However, the author's relationship with literature is closer to a *distant reading* position, which the Italian Marxist Franco Moretti popularised in around 2000 (there is no reflection on this relationship in the book at all, intellectual trends are usually 'in the air', and are integrated almost unnoticed into various theoretical provisions).

At least two of Ivanauskas' related methodological decisions are close to what Moretti proposed as a revival of literary research, or the possibility of approaching the social sciences or an interdisciplinary project. The first would be an analysis of the associated systems and the factors that control them; and the second, a conscious decision to research literature not based on what one has read oneself, but on the reading of works by other literary researchers (this is essentially what Ivanauskas does, though forgetting, like Moretti, that those readings might be very different, even contradictory). In other words, they suggest taking a bird's-eye-view of literature, almost ignoring the foundation of its existence (even Bourdieu, who constantly criticised *close reading* and interpretative practice, did not recommend such a radical step; he alleged it was necessary to combine the internal analysis of a work with an external, social or historical explanation of it).

This systemic approach is the strong point of Ivanauskas' book; but it also proves to be a sticking point for numerous methodological problems.

The undoubted advantage is that on one hand, he consciously rejects the opposition-collaboration dichotomy that still breaks through in assessments of Soviet-period culture. In addition, the Lithuanian writer is seen as an agent of a larger system, the so-called multi-national Soviet literary field. An analysis based on this approach shows convincingly that what we sometimes consider a feature or the uniqueness of Soviet-period Lithuanian literature is quite closely related to a vision modelled from the centre, from Moscow (which was most evident in the Stalinist period). The question of how the Soviet Union's nationalities policy, orientated at ethno-federalism, formed this vision shows how the trajectories of Lithuanian writers correlate with the trajectories of writers in other Soviet republics, according to the principle of similarities or contrasts. A systemic analysis of writers' positions at the intersection of the literary and political fields offers some interesting parallels (such as the case of the Georgian writer Konstantin Gamsakhurdia and the Lithuanian writer Antanas Venclova, in an analysis of the trajectories of the parents, who were important Soviet officials, and their dissident sons) and fundamental contrasts (between the centre-orientated Georgian writers and the very strong ethnic particularism in Lithuania). Ivanauskas also presents examples of the relationship between writers of other nationalities and cultural policy dictated from

the centre (the case of the Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov). Lithuanian writers' trajectories are discussed in the context of more general political and cultural processes (Stalinist control over culture, the *shestdesiatnyki*, *derevenskaya proza*, etc). Context in the book does not simply function as a backdrop, but as a systemic database of examples and cases: different cases are compared, and attempts are made to reconstruct or construct a kind of system operation model.

But the way the author has chosen his examples, and the cases he compares Lithuanian writers' trajectories with, is what poses most questions. First of all, according to what criteria does he choose his cases? What is the basis for the comparison? Why does he try to show the place of Lithuanian writers in the so-called friendship-of-nations empire compared to writers from those nations which were made part of the friendship-of-nations empire much earlier and had completely different political and cultural capital (Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), who nurtured different literary traditions, and, obviously, were more orientated towards the centre? Was it only political factors that determined closer links with the centre? We can recall that the literary links between Georgians and Russians were very strong from around the mid-19th century, so perhaps it would be worthwhile considering how they were used to promote the idea of Soviet literature. Would it not have been more worthwhile comparing, for example, the trajectories of writers from the Baltic States, which might have revealed unexpected twists and turns, rather than presenting answers we practically already have (the centre-orientated approach of Georgian writers, and the opposite in the case of Lithuanian writers is evident without greater analysis)?

Another group of questions and problems arises over the main tool used in the book for this system analysis. The divide between universalism and ethnic particularism, on which the analysis of the literary field's reaction to nationalities policy in the Soviet Union is based, is without doubt suitable and valid for this kind of object of research. However, it is also so abstract and so obvious that it can only provide a 'bird's-eye view', or, in other words, it offers a rather simplified and schematic spectrum of the literary field's reactions to the impact of the political field, as if literary researchers were not already well aware of these conditions (sometimes it appears that the book was actually written for a foreign audience). Indeed, Ivanauskas does use two important exceptions, which add interest to this abstract model. The first is that both systemic directions had numerous deviations, or gradations of involvement, in the friendship-of-nations empire. But does this not show that the system was more complex than can be revealed using the author's chosen analytical model? Do themes and motifs representing ethnic particularism (the rural environment, folklore and mythological figures) in the work of some writers (such as Sigitas Geda or Marcelijus Martinaitis) not actualise completely modern, universalism-orientated text

structures? The literary critic Rimvydas Šilbajoris, a member of the Lithuanian diaspora, has written on the paradoxical transformation of archaism into the Soviet period's modernism. It is a question that unavoidably arises among researchers of literature, trained in modern literary theory, that the form of a work of literature is inseparable from its content, and that it too is a way of conveying meaning. A historian might reject this kind of consideration, as it goes beyond the boundaries of his brief, although, on the other hand, one question leads to another: does an interdisciplinary object of research not warrant an interdisciplinary approach? Doubts over the functionality of the opposition Ivanauskas uses are further heightened by the fact that his concept of universalism is used in a rather undefined way. In the first half of the book, he usually discusses universalism in general; later, he switches to the Soviet concept of universalism. Perhaps this terminological inaccuracy is intended to reveal that there were actually two kinds of universalism: Soviet, whose paradigmatic representative, as Ivanauskas claims, would be Eduardas Mieželaitis; and universalism which reflected an orientation towards Western or global culture. This orientation would also be confirmed by the trajectories of some of the discussed (and not discussed) writers (Icchokas Meras or Saulius Tomas Kondrotas; the latter's trajectory is given as an example of gravitation into the global literary field by the French literature sociologist Pascale Casanova<sup>1</sup>).

Ivanauskas tries to dampen the universalism and ethnic particularism opposition by introducing another exception, the 'sandwich principle'. This analytical metaphor, whose author is probably Ivanauskas himself, does indeed meaningfully make the scheme not quite as abstract. According to this principle, both directions overlapped, affected, and penetrated one another. The functioning of this 'sandwich of friendship of nations' is convincingly demonstrated in an analysis of literature by non-Lithuanian writers in Lithuania. I would only suggest amending the sub-chapter's title. As mentioned, it is not literature itself that is analysed in the book, but the writers' movement between the literary and political fields, and the search for their position. The position of non-Lithuanian writers in the friendship-of-nations empire is quite problematic. Their unstable positions are laid out like a realisation of the mentioned 'sandwich principle', in the author's words, like a microcosm which reveals the behaviour of the diaspora and its members in the empire (this is especially evident in the case of writers of Jewish origin).

Although in his book the author often talks about the instability and lability of writers' positions, and their disordered trajectories, Ivanauskas' analytical model suggests looking at the Soviet system and Soviet culture, and national policy, almost as if they were completely rational, provoking easily foreseen steps into the literary field. However, coming down from

<sup>1</sup> P. Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris, 1999).

a bird's-eye view to a lower viewpoint, the picture becomes much more complex. Writers' trajectories do not form as reactions to the winds blowing across the political field, but as a constellation of numerous other factors. For example, it would be worth considering more thoroughly how interwar aesthetic provisions and behaviour models still functioned in the Soviet period, despite being officially repressed (Ivanauskas does touch on this question, for some reason basing his findings not on the rather comprehensive research of interwar literature and literary life, but on the citation of comments by the artist Adolfas Valeška). Did they perhaps contribute to the domination of so-called ethnic particularism? The picture could be specified still further by research into specific spheres of Soviet-era cultural policy, such as the publication strategies behind the so-called thick magazines, first of all *Druzhba narodov*, translation policy, the background behind the awarding of prizes, etc. A closer analysis of these spheres could show how coincidence fits in to this system, or personal choice, how the system affects these choices, and how it might have been avoided. One example is in Donata Mitaitė's conversation with the literary critic Leonid Bachnov<sup>2</sup>, which reveals the story of how Jonas Avyžius was given the Lenin Prize. Another example was mentioned by the writer Antanas A. Jonynas at the launch of Ivanauskas' book. According to him, reconstructing the position of the field's agents based only on protocols of meetings of the Writers' Union, for example, would be incorrect. A colleague who might have been following Party orders when he criticised a writer at a meeting would often apologise to the criticised individual, admitting that he had done so only because he was ordered to do so. A writer's everyday behaviour could be completely different to what would be recorded in documents. In fact, this example pin-points one of the problems not just in Ivanauskas' book, but in Soviet-period research in general. To what extent can the period's documents be trusted? What positions or participant's intentions from one field or another (politics, culture, etc.) are recorded? How can those intentions be reconstructed assisted by the memories or surveys of a certain field's participants? And how reliable is this oral history data?

Having laid out my criticisms of the abstract nature of Ivanauskas' analytical mode, I must admit that he works through an enormous quantity of new empirical material in the book (archival documents, conversations with field participants), paradoxically deconstructing the image of the literary field that implied the system's rationality which is created by the analytical model he used. This becomes especially evident in his analysis of the Stalinist period, where, for example, classics of Soviet literature that were hitherto considered as rather monolithic are reduced to rubble. A paradigmatic example is Aleksandras Gudaitis-Guzevičius, a Lithuanian

<sup>2</sup> D. Mitaitė, 'Sovietmečio literatų ryšiai', *Nevienareikšmės situacijos. Pokalbiai apie sovietmečio literatūros lauką*, ed. R. Kmita (Vilnius, 2015).

writer from the Soviet era, who, it appears, gave a rather critical assessment of the quality of Stalinist-period literature in a private conversation, for which he was reported to the security organs. The hitherto rather flat image of Stalinist-period literary life (directives from Moscow, responses from Lithuanian literary figures) is shown in this book as having been much more varied and complicated. This is probably one of the most important discoveries in Ivanauskas' research.

On the other hand, literary researchers will find many inaccuracies in the book, from oddities such as the synthetic genre (this is how the drama *Katedra* by Justinas Marcinkevičius is described on page 152), the title of Jonas Mikelinskas' novel, translated from Russian, as 'How time Flies' (it was actually *O laikrodžio eina* [But the Clock Keeps Ticking]), to the inclusion of Marcelijus Martinaitis in the generation of those 'born in 1930', or the very strange interpretations of Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphony, presented from secondary sources, and who for some reason does not appear in the index of names (incidentally, the exaggerated universalism of Bakhtin's theory and its deformation in the academic discourse has already been noted as a serious problem). The list of such inaccuracies is rather long, and is evidence of oversights and editing issues.

A discussion of the concept of relations between the literary and political fields that Ivanauskas offers, with specific interpretations, would take quite long: the fastidious eye of a literary researcher is the price an author must pay for interdisciplinary ambitions. However, on the other hand, this study forces literary researchers to think seriously about how the history of Soviet-era Lithuanian literature should be written, and how the social and aesthetic dimensions should be combined.

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