

AESTHETIC THOUGHT IN LITHUANIA IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES: ISSUES OF NATIONALITY AND SOCIALITY IN ART

SUMMARY

The study “Aesthetic Thought in Lithuania in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries: Issues of Nationality and Sociality in Art” analyzes the aesthetic thought of the Lithuanian National Revival period and the interwar Lithuania. The historical reconstruction of that thought encompasses two central thematic pivots – the nationality and sociality of art. Problems based on the above-mentioned topic, which were discussed in different discourses of aesthetic thought (in art critique, journalism and art philosophy), may be formulated around these central pivots. The book aims to emphasize the meaning of concepts of both national originality and social meaning of art as well as to show the dynamics of the development of these concepts, their mutual interaction and influence on both the formation of the national school and the inculcation of modern European culture into Lithuanian art. The material is analyzed in a chronological order: the first chapter “Obligations for the Nation” is dedicated to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the second and third chapters (“Expectations of Independence” and “Society in Cultural Progress”) cover the interwar period of Lithuania (1918–1940). All chapters are thematically divided into sections; the first chapter consists of three sections: “Wakened by *Aušra*”, “Towards Novelties” and “Towards Originality”; the second chapter comprises of these sections: “The Demands of Artistry”,

“On The Essence and Limits of Art”, “Communication Interference”, and the third chapter includes sections: “Epochal Signs“, “The Ways of Contemporary Art” and “Art in the National Culture Projects”.

The national movement of the 19th century, which originated with the appearance of the first clandestine Lithuanian newspaper *Aušra*, involved romantic and positivist conceptions of the national movement activity. The dispute between these conceptions on the goals of literature (which was then the only kind of art that was involved in the discourse on nationality) in *Aušra* encouraged the development of aesthetic thought. The engagement of literature with the goals of the national movement was an indubitable postulate for both *romantics* and *positivists* of *Aušra*, although there were differences in the implementation of their aims. The *romantics* were interested in the development of national consciousness of the landed nobility and intelligentsia with the help of romantic images of nationalism: the image of once-powerful Lithuanian state, noble pagan traditions and the beauty of Lithuanian language. The *positivists* were concerned about the goals of Lithuanian literature (not excepting fiction) in nationwide education which would lead towards economic and social progress. In the debates on ‘the use of poetry’, the *positivists* (Jonas Šliūpas, Jonas Mačys-Kėkštas) criticized the *romantics* for writing low-grade, mainly patriotic poetry and for misunderstanding the goals of the national movement which was seen in the lack of comprehensible and useful publications. Whereas, the *romantics* (Jurgis Zauerveinas) criticized devaluation of poetry and emphasized the role of poetry (as well as the role of art in general) in developing nationality; they also pointed out that the *positivists* were inclined to consider the aesthetic effect as a merely hedonistic pleasure. Indeed, the *positivists* were not concerned about the artistic value of literature not only because the circumstances urged them to focus on the education of the public and they assumed that the establishment of national literature may be postponed for the future. A disagreement between the theoretical points of departure was caused by the fact that the

positivists gave preference to the cognitive powers of literature and considered the aesthetic experience as a ‘pampering of senses’ and as an unnecessary addition to the ‘use for reason’. In the last decade of the 19th century, with the increase of periodicals and political differentiation of the national movement, the literary critique became a battlefield of the secular and clerical intelligentsia, where literature was interpreted only according to the ideological criterion. The greatest impulse for the literary process came from the positivist newspaper *Varpas*. Its programme emphasized not so much the encouragement of realist prose, but the refusal of romantic poetry, which according to them had lost its social potential. The ideological leader of the newspaper Vincas Kudirka opposed the aim of the fellow socialdemocrats (such as Stasys Matulaitis) to politicize the literature; his ambition was to overcome amateurship in the making of Lithuanian literature as well as in the aesthetic education of the public. However, only a few literary critics were concerned about the quality of the national literature, and the domination of the utilitarian view – i.e. the superiority of the ideological criterion – impeded its progress.

During the first decades of the 20th century social and cultural life underwent liberalization, which coincided with the lifting of the ban on the Lithuanian press in 1904. The attitude towards art, which existed in the consciousness and aesthetic thought of the Lithuanian artists at the end of the 19th century, did not satisfy young participants of the cultural process who had just returned from European and Russian universities (Juozapas Albinas Herbačiauskas, Sofija Kymantaitė-Čiurlionienė, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Balys Sruoga, Liudas Gira, Petras Rimša and others). They considered the *old* concept of both art and art critique regressive, and therefore expressed the need to spread a *new* concept that would direct the future Lithuanian literature, art, theatre and music towards the context of early modernism (neo-romanticism, symbolism). The didactic-patriotic rhetoric as well as educative positivism with its intention to uncover the maladies of social life were contrasted with the neo-romantic

mission of the artist. The new concept of the role of art preserved the service for the nation, however different means was used – the artist as the mediator of the ‘national spirit’ was empowered to raise aspiration for spirituality and to educate an individual as well as the entire society. The utilitarian concept of art was contrasted with the concept of the superiority of art work’s aesthetic value in comparison with non-artistic (ideological, moral, etc.) value, emphasis was put on the importance of subjectivity in art. Although ‘art for art’s sake’ did not echo in the views of the innovators of the Lithuanian art and art theory, they were accused of decadency by the exponents of the *old* concept of art (Adomas Jakštas, Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė). What the exponents of the *old* concept of art considered as decadency was indeed the defence of art’s autonomy in pursuance of overcoming the utilitarian concept in art theory and peripheral parochiality in art practice.

The critique of the exhibitions which were arranged by the Lithuanian Art Society played an important role in the development of the concepts of nationality of art. Neo-romanticism, symbolism and impressionism played a dominant role in these exhibitions; the aesthetic taste of the public and reviewers was challenged by a phenomenon of early modernism – the works of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. Both positive and negative reviews of the developing Lithuanian art reflected different interpretations of nationality. There was a growth of art critique which suggested searching for nationality in artistic expression rather than in thematic field or iconography, as the exponents of the *old* conception of art used to do. The dominant attitude was that the knowledge of Lithuanian folk art, as the protector of the ‘national spirit’, was the point of departure in creating unique national professional art. Some similarity was seen between a syncretic mythopoetic worldview, characteristic of the folk songs and folk art, and the cosmic dimension of neo-romantic and symbolist art. The first culturological discussions on nationality (Herbačiauskas, Vydūnas, Ramūnas Bytautas, and Sruoga) appeared: in some of these discussions the ‘national

spirit' was shrouded in mysticism, emphasis was put on the figure of the artist as a romantic genius; other discussions avoided irrationality while analyzing the archetypal base of national mentality.

The objectives of modernism, which were declared during the first two decades of the 20th century, were implemented by a generation of neo-romantics and symbolists in the third decade. Concerned about the level of literature in the nation that had created an independent state, and which sought to become equal to other European nations, members of this generation (Liudas Gira, Balys Sruoga) supported a higher quality of art and contradicted the dominant belief that patriotism could compensate artistic imperfection. The exponents of the traditional concept of art interpreted the opposition between the *old* and *new* principles of art as a confrontation between Lithuanian art and obscure modernism – not as a consistent phenomenon of the development of art. The opponents of the traditionalists (Sruoga and Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas) criticized this exaggerated conception of nationality which confines itself to the thematic repertoire of 'national romanticism' or to a pastiche of folklore. They made efforts to establish a view towards the national originality of art as an expression of the artist's worldview determined by national mentality, as a property that must not be constructed like a programme. After some research of the poetics and symbolism of folk songs, Sruoga came into conclusion that lyricism always remained the feature of Lithuanian worldview, and one needs to search for artistic features of national originality while analyzing the nature of lyricism. Mykolaitis-Putinas defended the symbolist poets, who were accused by literary critics of 'subjectivism' and estrangement from 'social life' for declaring the necessity of patriotic rhetoric.

The most significant moment in the process of inculcation of modern European aesthetic ideas was the polemic of Mykolaitis-Putinas and Jakštas on the essence and specifics of art. The neoscholastic aesthetics of the older generation of catholic cultural agents (Adomas Jakštas, Stasys Šalkauskis) possessed

an objectivist and normative conception of beauty (aesthetics). For Jakštas, a man is a 'minor creator' who follows an example of God's creativity; art is the creation of beauty according to the norms of beauty that fit the features of God's creation. While discussing these norms, Jakštas always emphasized rationality, order and law. The normative theory of Jakštas paved the base for an art critique which limited art to the classical paradigm (the classical versification in poetry, the didactic narrative in prose, the parlour academism in the fine arts) and to a strictly negative view towards the modernization of Lithuanian art. Mykolaitis-Putinas highlighted the problems of normative art theory which considered the norms of beauty as ahistorical and eternal. According to Mykolaitis-Putinas, such problems could be avoided if the definition of art did not include the concept of beauty – the essence of art lies in creation, therefore art can be defined as creation. Mykolaitis-Putinas explained the fundamental attitudes of European aesthetics, which involved relative autonomy of art, aesthetic attitude not driven by interest and aesthetic distance which had not yet been discussed in the Lithuanian context. He saw self-expression and avoidance of civil engagement, which were characteristic of modern art, as beneficial factors for aesthetic distance. Although the conception of Mykolaitis-Putinas had some flaws (he negated the creativity of science in order to give prominence to creativity as a basic and specific feature of art, and therefore he was reasonably criticized by Jakštas), but nonetheless it fulfilled a significant task in criticizing anachronistic normative aesthetics. Moreover, it is important to note that Lithuanian aesthetics began to recognize the definition of the essence of art which was close to the theories that linked the essence of art with aesthetic effect.

After gaining independence, the expectations to develop national culture were confronted with true reality – superficiality of public's cultural interests, philistinism and incompetently organized low state's support for art. The cause of the communication interference between the artists and society was seen not

only in the lack of public literacy, i.e. the public's inability to catch up with modern art, but also in the identification of patriotic engagement with national originality established by the traditionalists. Thus, some doubts emerged whether the mainstream 'national romanticism' could claim to be the only proper way to national art. The young generation (who had acquired university education in Lithuania and appeared on the art scene at the end of the third decade) emphasized the ideological and literary anachronism of national romanticism and directed Lithuanian art towards the modernist conception of creativity, where the opposition between the social and individual was no longer important.

In the fourth decade of the 20th century there were some significant changes in the conceptions of nationality and sociality of art: the search for national features gave way to such questions as the functioning of art, development of public aesthetic demands and the European dimension of national art. The definition of nationality as a distinctive feature of the artist's worldview determined by national mentality, which had been developed in the aesthetic thought of the 1920s, made an impact on the development of art in the 1930s. The idea that nationality and modernity do not oppose one another and that the artist's expression coincides with the self-expression of the nation as a 'collective individual' spread widely in art critique and journalism. It served for the aesthetic education of the public, i.e. for understanding of modernization of Lithuanian literature and art as a dialogue with tradition and for the acceptance of moderate modernism. The concept of the nationality of art was no longer normative – it did not oppose nationality and modernism as the *familiar* and *alien*. As the creation of original national art was no longer identified with a certain tendency of art, it opened the way for a pluralistic development of art which could meet the demands of the formation of the national school. The young generation's modern work was the most significant achievement of the 1930s and formed the national school of art. The opposition between younger and older generation involved not only a generation gap

between the art tendencies and generations of the artists, i.e. the rejection of old values for the sake of new ones, but rather an opposition against dominant creative stagnation. According to the Ars group, which declared the creation of national art based on studying folk art as the only source of tradition, folk art was interpreted in such a way that the emphasis was put on the common features of folk primitivism and modernism, i.e. the relation to reality and deformation of nature for the sake of expressionism. Art theory at the end of the 1920s transformed the avant-garde slogans of bringing art closer to wider society into promotion of the branches of art which could function in public spaces and everyday environment. Contrary to popular fiction, which remained in the margins of the literary process, *art deco* – a modernist version adapted for mass culture – due to its artistic features in monumental decorative art maintained a status of ‘fine’ art as well as social and cultural significance. The arguments of art critics, who defended and explained the principles of art autonomy and modern art as a language of forms, and who legitimized Lithuanian modern art, grew stronger. In response to the reproaches regarding the lack of sociality in art, expressed by various unprofessional critics of art exhibitions who focused mainly on the ideological point of view, the exponents of the Lithuanian modern art had to propagate the propositions of the 20th century art theories on the indifference of the pictorial motif. However, the innovators rejected formal art theory and radical modernism, considering it as a past stage of European modernist experiments.

The exponents of the catholic modernization movement (Juozas Keliuotis, Antanas Vaičiulaitis and Jonas Grinius), who supported the ideas of ‘new humanism’ borrowed from France, tried to deemphasize moral rigorism and hostility towards modernism expressed by Lithuanian catholic aesthetics and art critique of the older generation. While considering the relation between society and art as a mutual one, they tried to stress that art is not only a mirror-image of the dehumanized, technicist civilization, but also an effort to

resist its negative impact. Keliuotis and Grinius explained the essence of art using the conception of art as an unbiased intuitive cognition. According to Keliuotis, intuition is able to unify all what is individual with universal. Having transferred the principle of unity between individual and universal from aesthetic theory to the area of art, he considered the superiority of 'individualism' against 'universality' as the cause of modernist imperfection. Using the examples of French fiction and art, the exponents of 'new humanism' tried to direct Lithuanian artists towards neo-traditionalism, inviting them to embrace the achievements of modernism and bringing spiritual values back to art. The literary critics from the left (Kostas Korsakas), who followed the Marxist social theory, developed a more flexible, less exaggerated view towards the class determination of art. The former ideologist of the second wave of Lithuanian avant-garde literature began to propagate socialist realist prose. He and his fellow authors explained that their rejection of modernism was grounded on the link between artistic and cognitive value ('truth of art' and 'truth of life') which was characteristic of realist literature: realism presupposes a righteous representation of social phenomena; besides, telling the truth makes society active and incites social change. The emphasis was put on the communicative, rather than the propagandistic mission of art; the division of artists into the bourgeois and the progressive was rejected. Therefore the 'leftist' conception of art and social critique as the methodology of literary critique was more acceptable for a larger number of artists, critics and readers, and it made a greater impact on the literary process.

The role of art in national culture was discussed not only in the theorizing art critique, but also in cultural theory. Šalkauskis, the author of the influential Lithuanian cultural project of the interwar period, solved the problems of synthesis between national and universal culture by invoking the idea of synthesis between the East and the West. The universal substance of the culture of Lithuanian people who formed a nation is expressed through an individual form

of national culture, therefore the goal for building Lithuanian national culture is the synthesis of passive Eastern folk culture and active Western culture of intelligentsia. This synthesis should be developed “by adjusting folk forms for the universal substance of the human spirit”. By transferring the discussions on the universality of cultural substance and formal individuality from cultural philosophy to the discussion on art (which was rather episodic), Šalkauskis defined the national originality of art as an ‘elevation’ of folk art to a ‘higher level’. However, even in the middle of 1930s, he had sceptical doubts about the achievements of national art: he considered that the following of folk art traditions was ‘servile’ and that the adoption of Western art was ‘mechanical’. For Šalkauskis, the difference between creative and non-creative adoption was not of theoretical origin – it was based on worldview. Therefore, Šalkauskis’ view towards art, which was formed by the ideals of classical aesthetics, did not tolerate modernism and prevented him from recognizing the implementation of the goal he had set himself – the rapid development of the original, modern national school in 1930s. According to Julijonas Lindė-Dobilas, the guidelines for the national culture’s ‘movement towards renaissance’ in order to seek alignment with other national cultures of Europe, were: adoption of the universal cultural experience which is ‘conveyed by classic authors’ (the ‘synthesis’ of pagan and Christian culture was performed in Renaissance with reference to antiquity) and studies of folk art in order to recognize the ‘national spirit’. He was concerned about highlighting the link between the pre-Christian and Christian culture in Lithuania. For Lindė-Dobilas, the link between these two cultures involved the importance of ideological attitude, characteristic of Lithuanian mentality (ideology at that time was propagated through religion), as well as non-pragmatic lifestyle and the priority of moral values. Just like Šalkauskis declared the importance of synthesis between passive folk culture and active intellectual culture, Lindė-Dobilas also sought equilibrium between the distinct features of the national character personified in the figures of ‘ploughman’ and ‘warrior’ as well as between their corresponding modes of

cultural activity. The domination of the warrior-like attitude (an allusion to the artist's self-expression in romanticism) resulted in insufficient adoption of European culture. In order to overtake arrears and become a 'civilized nation', the 'warrior-like enthusiasm' must be replaced by peaceful, consistent work of a 'ploughman'. According to Lindė-Dobilas' conception of national culture, the 'national spirit' is not considered as the immutable given and its 'tragic beauty', which expresses a traumatic experience of the nation, is not seen as a benchmark of the nationality of art – in the course of the national evolution a 'man of renaissance' comes into being. In the fourth decade of the 20th century, Lindė-Dobilas recognized certain traces of the new renaissance worldview in the works of Lithuanian writers. In the intellectual milieu of the 1930s, charged with politics, the idea of 'cultural synthesis', which was posed by Šalkauskis, meant cultural openness, whereas the refusal of synthesis signified cultural isolation propagated by nationalist ideologues. Antanas Maceina, the representative of the catholic philosophy of young generation who supported the idea of synthesis, unlike Šalkauskis, related the synthetic character of Lithuanian culture not to the Eastern or Western, but to the nomadic and matriarchal sources. According to Maceina, Lithuanian 'national individuality' was formed by such factors as the specific ethnological structure caused by a certain combination of these sources as well as natural environment and historic predestination. By applying the cultural typology of *expression/form*, Maceina defined Lithuanian culture as *expressive*. According to the philosopher, the interpretation of national features of Lithuanian art and the anticipation of the favourable or unfavourable perspective for particular art forms and genres is possible when interpreting Lithuanian culture as a culture of *expression*. According to the philosopher, through the interpretation of Lithuanian culture as a culture of *expression*, it is possible to explain national features of Lithuanian art and to foresee both favourable and unfavourable perspective for certain art forms and genres. While referring to the 'Čiurlionis-like style' and the fondness of 'natural' symbols, which had penetrated Lithuanian art, he argued that

Lithuanian art of all times gave priority to the idea, rather than the attractiveness of form, and to symbols, rather than mimesis. Maceina did not distinguish the methodological step which allowed him to recognize these features as national and to eliminate features that did not match the type of *expression* (or those which he considered to be marginal). He used the concept of national school formed by modern art and literature of the fourth decade, which according to him proved that Lithuanian art is referred to the type of *expression*. While contemplating the future of Lithuanian culture, Maceina proposed increasing the scale of the culture of *form*. He then made a conclusion which enhanced cultural openness: Lithuanian culture, as a culture of *expression*, with its depth and spirituality can confront negative features of the culture of *form* of Western civilization (consumerism and superficiality of mass culture).

The author of this study hopes that the results of her work may be considered as one of the interpretations of the development of Lithuanian aesthetic thought. The issues of nationality and sociality of art, which were the central thematic pivots of this study, revealed the following:

- changes of the conceptions of nationality of art. In the beginning the conception of nationality as a patriotic engagement was based on the mimetic paradigm and normative art theory in which the national value of art indicated the features of content (thematics) and form (stylistics) that are characteristic of Lithuanian art. Eventually there was a movement towards interiorization of national value of art, which developed together with an increase of influence of the ideas of art autonomy, subjectivization of creation and early modernism in Lithuanian art; the nationality was considered as the given, determined by the ethnopsychological specifics of the artist's worldview, which should not be constructed as a programme. Therefore, the problem of the *Lithuanian art* programme was replaced with the problem of the pluralistic route of *Lithuanian art*, which did not involve any art currents distinguished by Lithuanian privilege, but the attention was paid to the

immanent factors of the development of art, i.e. to the more or less radical modernization and the relation with both national and world tradition. The exponents of modernization persuasively criticized the opposition between nationality and cosmopolitanism which was declared by the traditionalists, who considered the modernization of Lithuanian art as destructive barbarism. This opposition gradually diminished and it was replaced by the opinion that the national originality and modernism exist in harmony. In the field of art process, intensive changes in practice and theory of art and the confrontation that was related to these changes took place from the beginning of the 20th century until the end of the fourth decade; in the literary process these changes took place in the third decade. Eventually moderate post avant-garde modernism was promoted and legitimized in national literature and art.

- the conceptions of sociality of art. In the aesthetic thought of this period there were two angles of analysis of art. One of them involved an opposition between utilitarianism and autonomy that can be related to the interpretation of the nature and essence (specifics) of art, which determined the superiority of the aesthetic value of the art work against its non-artistic (patriotic, moral, political, i.e. social) value. The development of solutions to these problems involved a shift from the propositions of the superiority of social value, which was characteristic of the utilitarian and normative conceptions of art, to the spread of the conception of art based on the relative autonomy of art in respect to other spheres of culture and considers aesthetic value as the main criterion of art. The other angle of analysis of art involved questions of the mutual relation between art and social sphere. It included issues of communication between art and society as well as questions regarding the socio-cultural determination of art. The analysis of the relation between art and epoch resulted in the increase of influence of sociological methodology of art research.

– correlation between the concepts of nationality and sociality. Chronologically, the actualization and intensification of the conceptions of nationality (as a mission of patriotic education and as a spontaneous expression of national mentality) could be observed in the Lithuanian aesthetic thought in the period between the first decade and the first half of the third decade of the 20th century. At the end of the third decade, with the rise of literature and later – art, the emphasis was put on the problems of sociality of art, which included the debates on communication interference and the conditions for the professional development of literature and art as well as for pluralistic art process; meanwhile, the concept of the national originality of art was subsumed into the culturological discourse as a segment of the conceptions of national culture.

Translated by Kasparas Pocius