Chronic of the Baltic Countries

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ABSTRACT

Based on my readings about the Baltic world as well as on my own experience there some years ago, this article addresses literary and cultural issues concerning Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Freed from Soviet yoke for almost three decades now, the Baltic countries do not play any important political role in our so-called globalized world. Worthy of being recorded is that politics is not everything, and that there will always be space for thriving human activities, no matter how oppressing the environment is – and that is exactly the case of the Baltic countries. Last but not least, I must express my gratitude to my colleagues and friends Professor Mikhail Uvarov and Professor Júlio Tadeu Carvalho da Silveira, without whose generous collaboration, etc.

Keywords: *Literature, Reader, Baltic Countries, Culture, History*

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.

Winston Churchill

Tallin, Estonia (Photo taken by the Author)

A WORLD APART

"A world apart": this is the very least one can say about the Baltic Countries, namely Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – melodious feminine names that conjure up visions of ancient goddesses. They might well be integrated in the so-called *imaginary geographies*, such as Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, all of them named after women's first names: Dorothea, Perinthia, Thekla, Isadora, Cecilia, to cite but a few of their total of fifty-five.[1] What is more: as a consequence of their spontaneous insularity, imaginary worlds are often strangely empty, and, more times than not, they are home for the unknown and the unusual.[2] The Baltic countries,

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[1] "The book explores imagination and the imaginable through the descriptions of cities by an explorer, Marco Polo. The book is framed as a conversation between the aging and busy emperor Kublai Khan, who constantly has merchants coming to describe the state of his expanding and vast empire, and Polo. The majority of the book consists of brief prose poems describing 55 fictitious cities that are narrated by Polo, many of which can be read as parables or meditations on culture, language, time, memory, death, or the general nature of human experience. Short dialogues between Kublai and Polo are interspersed every five to ten cities discussing these topics. These interludes between the two characters are no less poetically constructed than the cities, and form a framing device that plays with the natural complexity of language and stories. In one key exchange in the middle of the book, Kublai prods Polo to tell him of the one city he has never mentioned directly – his hometown. Polo's response: 'Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice'" (Mark Swedetalii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invisible_Cities [2019]).

[2] Cf. Pierre Jourde. *Géographies imaginaires de quelques inventeurs de mondes au XXe. siècle. Gracq*, *Borges*, *Michaux*, *Tolkien*, Paris, José Corti, 1991, p. 57; see also João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. "On geography and literature", in *Issues of communication in contemporary cultural context. International Readings on Theory, History and Philosophy of Culture*, Saint Petersburg, Russian

nonetheless, have not just a literary existence; they are much more than abstract entities forged by human imagination and inventiveness; they do exist in physical reality and have their own frontiers, geographical limits to which they extend their respective territories – always bearing in mind, however, that a frontier does not have the single and political meaning of a separation between States; it also corresponds to the ambiguous region where one passes, abruptly or gradually, from the dimension of the *same* to that of the *other*, if I may put it in Platonic terms.[3]

Indulis Ranka's majestic sculptures (Sigulda, Latvia)

(Photo taken by the Author)

Located on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea (*Mare Balticum*= "white sea": apparently, the term "Baltic" stems from the Indo-European root *bhel*, which means *white*), the Baltic countries are part of what one can broadly define as Northern Europe. As if being dwarfed by their giant eastern neighbour of the East (Russia) were not enough, those are really tiny countries, even for European standards – not forgetting that Europe, having just over a million more square miles than Australia, is the second smallest continent. The creation of the Iron Curtain, which torn apart Europe, dividing her in two antagonistic geopolitical zones during more than four decades, cut off Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – together with Soviet Union [which annexed them by force] and their Eastern satellite (which was an euphemism for *slave*) countries – from distinctively Western values, notably Democracy and her foundation, which is Freedom.[4] This helps to explain how little we

know about East European literature, art, history and culture in general. Here in the West, who really cares about the life and work of the Polish painter Jan Matejko (1838-1893), the Slovenian poet France Prešeren (1800-1849) or the Moldavian holy ruler and national hero Stephen III (1433?-1504) – let alone the Estonian king Lembitu (?-1215), the Latvian-Brazilian philosopher Stanislavs Ladusãns (1912-1993) [whom I had the honour to know personally a few months before his death] and the Lithuanian painter, composer and writer Mikolojus Čiurlionis (1875-1911)?

Riga (Latvia) Photo taken by the Author

FREEDOM AS AN EXCEPTION

One exception being its ancient times, the Baltic world's history can be summarised as brief periods of freedom and prosperity alternated with longer ones of occupation and domination. Estonia, for instance, "bite-sized country"[5] with her so distinctive non-Indo-European language[6], "has enjoyed only sparse periods of independence, notably in the 20th century between the World Wars and since 1991".[7] Latvia ("name derived from the name of the

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Federation Ministry of Culture/St Petersburg Association of Scientists and Scholars/UNESCO, v.6, 1998, pp. 472-477.

[3] "But what do we mean by these words, 'the same' and 'the other', which we have just used?" (Plato. *Sophista*, 254E).

[4] See Thomas Woods, Jr. *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (with new Foreword by Cardinal Antonio Cañizares), Washington, Regnery, 2012, p. 9sq.

[5] Sarah Johnston et alii. *Europe on a shoestring*, Victoia/Oakland/London, Lonely Planet, 2005, p. 331.

[6] "Estonian is closely related to Finnish and belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family. Alongside Finnish, Hungarian and Maltese, Estonian is one of the four official languages of European Union that is not of an Indo-European origin. Despite some overlaps in the vocabulary due to borrowings, in terms of its origin, Estonian and Finnish are not related to their nearest geographical neighbours, Swedish, Latvian, and Russian, which are all Indo-European languages" (Mart Rannutetalii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Estonian_language# Classification [2019]).

[7] Sarah Johnston et alii. *Europe on a shoestring*, op. cit., p. 331.

ancient Latgalians, one of the four Indo-European Baltic tribes [along with Couronians, Selonians and Semigallians], which formed the ethnic core of modern Latvians together with the Finnic Livonians"[8]) has a historical background which is best described as "a troubled whirlwind of fierce struggle and downright rebellion".[9] In the second half of the 13th century, Lithuania become a major political and military power in East Europe; a few decades later, already bearing the title of Grand Duchy, Lithuania expanded her borders up to the Black Sea (parts of present-day Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and Russia merged with her) and turned into nothing less than the largest country in the whole European continent. From the 14th to the 16th centuries Lithuania was a true empire; but lean cows long years were ahead: indeed, Lithuania "disappeared off the maps of Europe when she was colonised by Poland and Russia. In 1940, Lithuania was forced to become part of the USSR. Within a year 40,000 Lithuanians were killed or deported. Up to 300,000 more people, mostly Jews, died in concentration camps and ghettos during 1941-44 Nazi occupation. The USSR returned with a vengeance in 1945, and an estimated 200,000 people were murdered or deported to Siberia".[10]

Vilnius, Lithuania (Photo taken by the Author)

CONCLUSION

Freed from Soviet yoke for almost three decades now, the Baltic countries do not play any important political role in our so-called globalized world. Worthy of being recorded is that politics is not everything, and that there will always be space for thriving human activities, no matter how oppressing is the environment around us. Italian Renaissance emerged and flourished in a ravaged by wars Italy. As for this world apart called Baltic countries, the very least we can say about them is that they have a lot to offer for anyone who loves nature, literature, art, culture and all other things that dignify life as a whole.

Vilnius, Lithuania (Photo taken by the Author)

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[8] Ray A. Ceaser. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia (2019).

[9] Sarah Johnston et alii. *Europe on a shoestring*, op. cit., p. 721.

[10] Idem, p. 741.