

IN SEARCH OF THE SELF: JURGA IVANAUSKAITĖ'S A JOURNEY TO SHAMBHALA

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Since antiquity, since Homer's Odysseus sailed for Troy and after ten years of wandering came back to Ithaca, travel narratives have been firmly entrenched into the texture of world literature, and the claim that travel-writing is probably the oldest genre would not be an overstatement. The first Lithuanian travel texts were written in Latin and appeared in the sixteenth century, although Lithuanians travelled in Europe already in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly monks, traders and diplomats. In the fifteenth century travelling became wide-spread, when many young noblemen went to study to foreign universities in Poland, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, and Holland. Travel abroad became fashionable, it was also regarded an inseparable part of one's education as well as a mark of distinction and a possibility to move up a career ladder in the royal court. As Professor Eugenija Ulčinaitė points out,¹ the oldest Lithuanian travel text seems to be *A Journey to Italy: the Diary of 1575* by Jurgis Radvila. This proves that Lithuanians have always been a nation of travellers, although it seems to

contradict the traditional nineteenth-century image of Lithuanians as a nation of sedentary quiet peasants firmly rooted in their farm lands. Research shows that, curiously enough, travel writing makes up a substantial amount of the Lithuanian literary heritage, even if it has often been regarded as an inferior genre and not favoured by our reviewers, critics and scholars.

People have always been fascinated by travels to distant foreign lands associated with unknown experiences and exciting adventures. But travel is not only a means of acquiring knowledge about the unknown "Other"; by travelling we shape the world with our minds thus shaping ourselves. Travelling also means a journey of self-discovery. Homi Bhabha speaks about "re-creation of the self in the world of travel."² Travelling means negotiating with cultural difference and cultural hybridity, with cross-cultural initiation and, probably, with one's own multiple identities opened-up in the world of travel. These problematic issues are mirrored by travel writing in the form of a record of journeys, diaries, memoirs with the focus

¹ Eugenija Ulčinaitė, *Lietuvos Renesanso ir Baroko literatūra*, Vilnius: VU leidykla, 2001, 187.

² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: 2004, 12.

not only on the discovery of places but also on their creation. As Peter Bishop rightly observes, “travel accounts are involved in the production of imaginative knowledges. They are an important aspect of a culture’s myth-making.”³ A travel text, structured as a narrative, becomes an important cultural document, and, as any other form of narrative, raises not only the issue of representation but also the question of national and cultural identity construction. Identity is marked by ambiguity and fluidity, it is never fixed and stable, changing across time; it is determined by history, ideology, power relations and constructed by historically and ideologically specific discursive practices. This is the discursive approach to identification which is seen as a construction, an on-going process never completed. Stuart Hall writes: “Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity [...]”⁴ Identity is constructed through difference, through the relation to the Other. According to Homi Bhabha, identity is shaped through “visual demand for a knowledge

³ Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La. Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*, London: The Athlone Press, 1989, 3.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity’?”, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. By Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, London: SAGE Publications, 2005, 4.

of the Other, and its representation in the act of articulation and enunciation.”⁵ Thus the discovery of the Other acquires a particular significance for the construction of identity. It is through cultural difference, through the knowledge of the Other that identity is reflected on. I should think this could be a valid theoretical frame of reference for my essay. It is through this lens that I will look into Jurga Ivanauskaitė’s travel book *A Journey to Shambhala* (1997) as a reflection of both personal and, in a way, national consciousness. Her book is also a proof that people seem to need sacred or utopian places exerting a particular fascination on them. And such places are mythologized. In Ivanauskaitė’s travel text it is the East/Orient that is mythologized, although at the same time this kind of mythologizing, as I will try to argue, becomes intrinsically problematic.

In 1994 Jurga Ivanauskaitė for the first time went to India where in Dharamsala she studied Tibetan Buddhism. A few years later the writer spent a year travelling in India and Nepal, staying for some time in a Buddhist monastery high in the mountains, in total seclusion, far away from the civilized world, and immersing herself in the study of religious texts, in mantras, mandalas and meditation. She wrote about her travel experiences in the book *A Journey to Shambhala* which is more than a travel account. Rather it is a journey of self-discovery, the search for the Self, a pilgrimage. And a pilgrimage is a sacred journey having its own sacred places, sacred routes,

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 72.

and its account is often conveyed in a confessional mode which imparts authenticity. The travel atmosphere and the way of travelling is very important, which speaks through hotels, cafes, travel guides and travel means described by Ivanauskaitė at times with mild irony. India and Nepal are used as an imaginative escape, a relaxation from Western values and rigid rationalism. In Ivanauskaitė's travel book, these places are both real and imaginary: they function as precise geographical locations (replete with people, customs, landscape, weather, food, clothing, etc.), but they are also imbued with symbolic meaning. The title-word *Shambhala* (which is also the key-word) assumes a special significance in the book: it is both a concrete and a symbolic space. First, "Shambhala" is a small café described as "probably the most popular meeting-point in all Dharamsala"⁶; it also functions as a sort of post-office with its notice-board, and a point of allocation bustling with "newcomers hunched under the burden of big back-packs and still bigger illusions."⁷ The concept of *Shambhala* is, however, expanded to signify the Oriental milieu which, according to Ivanauskaitė, induces a bizarre change in the newcomers' identity. Casting a critical and ironic gaze on the newcomers to the East, including herself, the writer observes: "The Oriental environment hypnotizes and drugs them, enslaves, subjugates, depersonalizes, and completely dissolves them. This might be the bliss of Extinction that the decadents

of the West dreamt about, but it is by no means Freedom or Light."⁸

The writer provides the reader with the insider's view of the East, combining her personal experiences with general observations about the oriental life-style, Buddhist philosophy and religion, with theorizing about such things as psychoanalysis, the sacred and the profane, with historical excursions and legends. Hers is an interesting text with a strong self-reflexive quality, full of references to diverse philosophical and religious sources. Ivanauskaitė's book combines external and internal stories; an external chain of events serves as a springboard for self-reflection and philosophizing. Thus her travel account reads both like an adventure novel, a confession revealing the writer's existential anguish caused by the crisis of values, and, at times, like an essay; it leaves no doubt that Ivanauskaitė is well-versed in the Buddhist doctrine; however, often she becomes too fond of dealing out simplistic truths. It is the adventure stories she is spinning that is her greatest asset, not theorizing and naïve philosophizing drawn from other texts, the list of which she, wisely, provides at the end of her book, ranging from M.Eliade's and E.M.Bernbaum's texts to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Ivanauskaitė herself admits that all those texts "accompanied, protected and inspired" her on her sacred journey. Her strength as a writer lies in her powers of observation, in the subjective account (often tinged with irony and self-irony) of her travel experiences, of encounters with all sorts of people, both local and

⁶ Jurga Ivanauskaitė, *Kelionė į Šambalą*, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 1997, 72. (This and all further translations from Lithuanian into English are mine.)

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

foreigners to the East. Her impressions and detailed, expanded “baroque” descriptions of the people and places all open up the unfamiliar, bizarre and fascinating world of the Orient upon which Ivanauskaitė looks with admiration and in which nothing astounds her except two things: a young nun with a shaved head, breast-feeding a two-week old baby in the bus station and a turbaned Sikh, the owner of a small and cosy restaurant, who is stuck by the cash register, passionately immersed in and completely carried away by Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Time spent in the East taught the writer Peace and Wisdom.

The writer is playing with the opposition between the West and the East, and it is the East which is privileged while the West is demonized. According to Ivanauskaitė, “the West increasingly suffers from the dangerous abyss dividing the intellect and the Spirit.”⁹ Although this issue is more problematic than it might appear at first sight, and the writer is conscious of the ambivalent situation she and other foreigners find themselves in exploring the East. She herself feels stuck between the two cultures – that of the East and of the West – and is keenly aware of the cultural differences between the two worlds. Observing life in India and Nepal with its dire poverty, its squalor and stink, and in spite of all the hardships she herself experienced in the East, the writer draws the conclusion: “I do not know why this everyday reality speaks to me while the other one, obscured by the facades of posh houses, glittering and spotlessly clean shop-windows,

abracadabra of advertisements, is increasingly becoming more and more mute...”¹⁰ In the Himalayas she is astounded by the dire poverty of the people who nevertheless seem to be able to live a happy life in a friendly community, in harmony with each other and with nature. Moved by her experiences in the East she makes the following declaration: “Because in fact deserts do not stretch here where it is so easy and free but in hysterical big cities of the West, in the hearts of their well-fed inhabitants.”¹¹ Thus her travel book is also an ironic look on the Western civilization, a critique of consumerism, and functions as a construction of new myths: the wisdom and peace of the East is postulated, the East which is very much desirable but not attainable for the Westerners. Ivanauskaitė’s text ironizes the clichéd Western image of the East which is conceived as an earthly Paradise where crowds of westerners flock looking for escape, salvation and redemption; however, their spiritual search turns out to be not that simple, because all the problems, according to Tibetans, are caused not by the external world but they are lurking inside ourselves. Having fled from their own lives with the spirit of materialism and consumerism, the foreigners are trapped in the enclosure of exoticism, and their search for spirituality (or novelty and a break rather, one suspects) becomes problematic while their newly assumed identity ambivalent. The “psychonauts” (the term coined by Ivanauskaitė) who come to the East “have already lost

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

the spiritual and mental harmony or they may never have had it at all.”¹² The Orient is ironically represented as a fashionable sacred site of Western pilgrimage. Thus flocking to the East is shown as part of the current vogue, snobbery and affectation which is ironized in the book; for instance, Ivanauskaitė describes how Dalai Lama’s preaching attracts people from all over the world, among them “beauties with radiant complexion and close-shaved monk-like heads; spectacled, intelligent ladies clad like Buddhist monks, tall guys from Californian beaches on whom the *haute couture* of the Sunset boulevard would look more suitable than the togas of the Tibetan novices; a hundred-year old Austrian countess robed in purple and never, even in the temple, parting with a white, angry little dog...”¹³ They are all driven by the new fashionable myth of an Eastern spirituality and fall into the trap of their own false assumptions and desires of attaining Freedom and Light the easiest way because they “wish or maybe they are used to getting everything fast and without any effort – the syndrome of the “supermarket”, “fast food”, “instant coffee”, “ready made.”¹⁴ Newcomers from the West firmly believe that big money buys everything, that their wishes will be instantly gratified for money, thus they often become an easy prey to crooks and charlatans masquerading as gurus and may end in psychological torment and madness.

In Ivanauskaitė’s text Shambhala is conceptualized as a non-existent location,

a mystic and imaginary place, a metaphorical space, an incarnation of serenity and bliss, a treasure vault of Wisdom. It is conducive to the construction of a totally different – Oriental – identity based on renouncing consumerism and rationalism of everyday reality. Drawing on M.Eliade’s ideas Ivanauskaitė believes that “creating or meditating mandala man can step into a different, great cosmic time and experience the Void, this way annihilating everyday reality and passing into the transcendental being, thus transforming samsara into nirvana, the Absolute.”¹⁵ The writer is struggling with her own ego trying to suppress it, and feels her “Western nature fighting with her Eastern experience.”¹⁶ The Eastern experience allegedly helps to bring out a different identity. She records how she is enchanted watching the Buddhist monks perform their ritual dancing and all of a sudden visualizes her own numerous reincarnations: her “innumerable deaths unfolding from each other and stepping in an endless line reaching the primordial Origin...”¹⁷

Landscape becomes important for the construction of identity. The writer engages with an unfamiliar and overwhelming mountain landscape which triggers peculiar inner experiences. Desolation and solitude, the immense wild landscape of the Himalayas produce a sense of the sublime. This kind of landscape exalts and fills the human soul but also dwarfs and crushes it. She feels herself “becoming lighter than the white tiny clouds floating in the fabu-

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

lously blue sky over the Himalayas”, her identity “dissolving, dispersing, becoming fluid” and finally merging with the world which here seems to be almost primeval and unified.¹⁸ Conceptualizing Death is another signifier highlighting the divide between the Oriental and Western identity. Ivanauskaitė’s travel book is pervaded and haunted by death and its recurrent contemplation. The writer compares the Buddhist notion of death with the one practiced in the West, referring to Tibetan legends and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* which became very popular in the West since its first translation was published there in 1927. Death is a taboo, a forbidden subject in the West, while in the Tibetan understanding death imparts additional meaning to human life. Ivanauskaitė confesses that through thinking and meditation she overcame fear of death. Curiously enough, her obsession with death, which explicitly and pervasively features in the text, turned out to be so tragically prophetic: the writer died of cancer ten years after the publication of her travel book.

Symbolically, the writer’s journey to Shambhala becomes an inward journey, a sacred journey to one’s own hidden self in search of spirituality with the aim of changing oneself and assuming a different, according to Ivanauskaitė, a superior identity. This change presupposes an absolute refusal from egotism, the annihilation of one’s ego and the “obliteration of personal history” as a means of attaining happiness and bliss, nirvana: “So what if my ego quizzically whispers to me that I used

to like French cooking or Chinese delicacies, vintage red wine, and that I used to hobnob with refined aesthetes? But *then* and *there* I felt a void, I felt that something was always missing, while *here* and *now*, cutting the bird-like toenails from Lama’s unwashed feet I am feeling happy. Maybe this is the bliss which only *the obliteration of personal history* can bring about. Here nobody is interested either in my native country or city, language, profession, social position, either in my family, age or my real name. I am simply Nobody having come from the Nowhere country where time should probably be named Never.”¹⁹ This kind of authorial stance clashes with the existentialist philosophy which Ivanauskaitė openly challenges in her text, calling for the denial of individualism as a corner-stone of the Western mentality and life-style. She equally questions the poststructuralist view of the world created by discourse which, however, according to Ivanauskaitė, “is not the sole reality but only a narrow subjective space created by ourselves.”²⁰

To conclude, the determining principle for the construction of identity, as the above discussed text shows, is the cultural difference, the knowledge of the Other which is instrumental in inscribing and revealing identity. And, needless to say, Ivanauskaitė’s book demonstrates how a geographical and spiritual journey in search of the Other becomes transformed into a pilgrimage – a sacred journey in search of the Self.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

SAVOJO „AŠ“ PAIEŠKOS: JURGOS IVANAUSKAITĖS *KELIONĖ Į ŠAMBALĄ*

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S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje telkiamasi į tapatybės konstravimą kelionių literatūroje apskritai, ir ši problema konkrečiai analizuojama Jurgos Ivanauskaitės kelionių knygoje *Kelionė į Šambalą*.

Kelionių naratyvas – tai ne tik svarbus kultūrinis dokumentas. Jis suponuoja ir tapatybės konstravimo problemą. Kelionėje susiduriame ne tik su kultūrine kitybe ir hibridiškumu; keliaujant savoji tapatybė atsiveria įvairiais požiūriais. Kelionė reiškia ir savęs atradimą. Analizės teorinis išeities taškas – Homi Bhabhos ir Stuardo Hallo kritinės nuostatos ir ideologinė pozicija: tapatybė konstruojama per santykį su kultūrine kitybe; tapatybė nėra stabili ir fiksuota, bet fluidiška, ji kinta priklausomai nuo vietos ir laiko; ją

lemia ideologija, istorija, galios santykiai, konstruoja istorinės ir ideologinės diskursyvinės praktikos.

Šis kritinis žiūros taškas ir pasirenkamas Ivanauskaitės knygai analizuoti. Rytų ir Vakarų gyvenimo būdo ir vertybių supriešinimas, sakralus metaforiškas peizažas, mirties samprata Ivanauskaitės tekste tampa svarbiais tapatybės konstravimo elementais. Simboline prasme rašytojos kelionė į mitologizuojamus Rytus, mistinę Šambalą tampa jos sakralia vidine kelione į save, slaptas savo sielos gelmes, ieškant dvasingumo ir savęs tobulinimo, galimybių keisti savo asmenybę. Geografinė ir dvasinė kelionė siekiant pažinti kultūrinę kitybę transformuojama į savęs pažinimo piligrimystę.

Gauta 2009 06 18

Priimta sklebti 2009 09 01

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