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POSTMODERNISM IN LITHUANIAN LITERATURE

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RECENT LITHUANIAN NOVELS AND THE 'EVERYTHING IS ALLOWED' CRITERION

Does postmodern literature exist in Lithuania? Or do we just use the concept of 'postmodernism' and apply it to literature? If we only use the concept, with what purpose? If, however, postmodernism exists as a phenomenon in Lithuanian literature, and not only as a concept, how to find and recognize it? How to explain it descriptively? It is not so easy to answer this question. It seems it must also exist as a phenomenon because when interviewing Tomas Venclova, Jurga Ivanauskaitė asked for his opinion about postmodern literature as a phenomenon and wondered if he, like many others in Lithuania, negated it categorically. Negation should perhaps be understood as criticism here, not as negation of existence. Ivanauskaitė did not explain in any detail what postmodern literature specifically was. Venclova answered that he did not negate it categorically, but could not say he liked it very much. We will know what is valuable in postmodernism, according to him, when we have some distance in time. Neither did he specify, which particular literary works by Lithuanian authors should be attributed to postmodernism. He

only shared with us a criterion to recognize it. He referred to Leszek Kolakowski's claim that postmodern literature seems to be written according to the principle of "everything is allowed" (from shocking scenes of sex or horror to kitsch as a principle and that use of texts that was called plagiarism in the past).¹ I feel that this definition is not descriptive but judgmental, as it implies some negative moral commitment of postmodern literature: kitsch, tastelessness, plagiarism and horror. I try to recall any work by Lithuanian authors that would fit the definition offered by Kolakowski. It seems my knowledge of Lithuanian literature is too poor. Nothing comes to my mind immediately. Therefore, I have to do some research. I read once again some recent Lithuanian novels: *Three Seconds of Heaven* (*Trys sekundės dangaus*) and *Doriforė* by Sigitas Parulskis, *The Green* (*Žali*) by Marius Ivaškevičius, *Erosion* (*Erozija*) by Gintaras Grajauskas, *The Life of Sundzu in the Sacred City of Vilnius* (*Sundzu gyvenimas šventajame Vilniaus mieste*) by Ričardas Gavelis, *Placebo* (*Placebas*) by Jurga Ivanauskaitė and *A Name in the Dark* (*Vardas tamsoje*) by Renata Šerelytė. I have not yet reread Herkus Kunčius. I find all kinds of things in these texts, but I do not find any illicit use of borrowed texts. The authors put only their own texts into their novels. I do not find any horror scenes either. Neither is there much eroticism. True, the main character of Parulskis's novel *Three Seconds of Heaven* does not shy away from recalling his erotic escapades. He might have even written them down somewhere in order not to forget this unique experience. He calls it 'The Catalogue' (Parulskis 2002a: 159-177). The hero finds solace in these reminiscences, for he lives in an environment where men "love only their parachutes". Yet these reminiscences are neither perverted nor horrible, it is mere heterosexual eroticism. And the main character loves only Maria, though she remains an unattainable dream. The dose of erotic descriptions is quite modest: from page 159 to page 177. It is all in one place. If you want, you can simply skip the pages. This is not Henry Miller and even less so George Bataille. Eroticism in George Bataille's novel *Story of the Eye* (translated into Lithuanian) is really shocking. It merges with death and dirt. A sample of Bataille: "wearing only knickers, she collapsed in a pool of liquid manure under the bellies of the grunting swine. Once the door was shut, Simone had me fuck her again and again in front of that door, with her arse in the mud, under a fine drizzle of rain, while Sir Edmund tossed off." (Bataille 1979: 46). I could not retell the story of Bataille's novel. It would be a too difficult psychologically. I am not a fan of novels of this kind. I have read it for professional reasons, as I am impressed with Bataille's philosophical meditations in his book *Inner Experience* in which there are no such transgressions. Yet the intrigue in his novels develops by the principle: "what else could we trans-

¹ See Venclova, T. "Agnostikas su tikėjimo potencialu," (Ivanauskaitė 2005: 283).

gress?” The criterion for being ‘postmodernist’ suggested by Kolakowski and Venclova is suitable for this novel. Bataille followed the principle ‘everything is allowed’ thus destroying all moral taboos he came across. However, there is not an inkling of Bataille’s conception in the novels by the Lithuanian authors I have mentioned. The narrator of Parulskis’s novel, a paratrooper, if compared with the characters in Bataille’s novel, looks like a meek Catholic longing for his beloved Maria and God, waking up from time to time on his prayer-book and recollecting his sins. And he does not even intend to joke with God. He reflects on his own hovering in some nondescript emptiness, some overwhelming gap. This is existentialist literature. Searching for the meaning of everything that exists. Similar to what Camus or Sartre wrote. I think it is far away from postmodernism thus defined.

POSTMODERN WRITING – FREE WRITING?

In order to find postmodernism in Lithuanian literature we have to define its criteria differently. Let us try another start. Aušra Jurgutienė has taken a different path. She has followed Umberto Eco who interprets a postmodern literary work as an open text. In such a novel the story loses its center and the linear development of the plot. It can be read from anywhere because the world it creates has no boundaries and no natural laws of change. It reveals no meaning. Such a novel exhibits scattered images not related by any tight semantic ties. The aesthetic effect comes from an incoherent mosaic (Jurgutienė 2005: 4). The author writes because ‘it writes’ this way for him. And this kind of writing is what a novel is. I like this definition because I find it easier to understand how to assess *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Usually critics classify Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a modern novel; nonetheless, according to the criteria suggested by Jurgutienė and Eco, this novel may be classified also as postmodern. Its semantic labyrinth intrigues the reader, but it does not let him or her to admire a coherent story and the clear motivation of its characters in any way. The main character in Parulskis’s novel *Doriforė*, a writer, returns in his thoughts to this novel by Joyce. The writer even quotes it, somewhat confusingly for the reader and the critic. Perhaps Parulskis follows Joyce and creates a postmodern novel? Again, I doubt this hypothesis. First of all, this quotation from Joyce’s novel comes to the main character’s mind quite naturally. After all, he is a writer: he reads what others have written. Perhaps he has read this phrase before going to get his car fixed at a car service. This is why he has something to do here: he does not do any small talk, but meditates on Joyce. He has something to think about. He prepares for writing. He does not waste time. Of course, a writer keeps thinking of something all the time. Of course, he might want to write a novel similar to

Joyce's. It would be fine if the novel received such an international recognition. But even if this is what the narrator dreams about, this still does not mean that Parulskis, as the writer of this novel, is following the same way. The story of the novel is sufficiently clear and coherent. And, I would say, self-ironic. It can be summarized. The writer as a character wants to write a novel because this is his job. And also he needs money, as he has nothing to live on. Eager to insure himself from vicissitudes of fate he persistently visits his publisher in order to reach an agreement on the theme, because he wants to write a bestseller. But everything goes wrong: he is stuck. He seems to love his wife, but another woman intrudes in his life. He is not very active in that love triangle, and when both women leave him he understands that he loves his wife. Finally it emerges that his new lover Diana is also a writer who has written a better novel than he has, and the publisher chooses her, not the hero of our story. He is terribly disappointed and tries to commit suicide. Unsuccessfully: he is found out by a passer-by collecting horseshit. And here, perhaps, the most self-ironic subtext of the novel is hidden. Neither intellectual irony, nor sophistication, nor women have helped him, as he was saved by blind coincidence. This is a novel about how impossible it is to write a novel. It is impossible to love, impossible even to die at one's own will. This is a story about the risk of the total defeat of a writer as a writer and as a man. The story is coherent, and the book is written in short chapters. Parulskis, already as a writer, does not fall into writing as such, does not take pleasure in the possibilities opened by it. The novel is constructed. Its size is quite modest. It does not become larger only because the writer likes to submerge into writing as it happens with Joyce's *Ulysses* or *The Post Card* by Jacques Derrida. Such mosaic writing allows combining philosophical and literary discourses, writing out all associations undulating around the chosen subject. *Placebo* by Ivanauskaitė tends more towards this style of postmodern writing. For instance, all the stories created by cat Basete could be considered as inclusions of mosaic writing here.

Of course, we could wonder whether it is not an unexpected turn in the plot when the main hero of Parulskis's novel, *Doriforė*, leaves unexpectedly for Crete with Diana in order to bring back the remains of his brother who has suddenly turned up but already killed himself. Perhaps it is. But this 'unexpectedness' is possible only when a coherent plot pushes forward the events. I think it is coherent in this novel. As far as this aspect is concerned, a novel by Gintaras Grajauskas, *Heresy (Erezija)*, too, could not be classified as postmodern. True, three plot lines intertwine here. They are cut and arranged one following another, but the main action of the novel also moves forward very clearly. Two hitmen wait for the writer at his home. They are seemingly intent to kill him for some written text. One hitman, who is not too

literate, starts reading the text because he has nothing else to do: he wants to understand the reason for the commissioned murder. He understands neither the text nor the reason. The parallel slashed pieces are presumably the writer's manuscripts, difficult to understand for the unsophisticated reader, the hitman. But the reader cannot fully understand them either. Both the mythology of Lithuanian nation and a Franciscan monk's journey to Lithuania are told in an original way. But what to expect from a writer who does not come near his home for quite a long while? Perhaps he was drunk and wrote a load of rubbish. The plot of the novel is constructed in a very sophisticated manner, but everything turns around the writer's poor writing. When the writer appears he looks quite miserable – much like the hitmen, as they no longer know whether they should kill him. Their boss has disappeared. One of them is particularly funny. He thinks and speaks in the slang of a character from Lithuanian comedy show "Bicycle News," a newsagent from Šiauliai. Another hitman is more intellectual. While the hitmen wait the writer does not even suspect anything and probably drinks alcohol with abandon, because when he comes home he is not very stable on his legs and not very surprised finding them there. However, a conversation with them allows the writer to understand the value of his writing more profoundly, the meaning and purpose of the craft he has chosen. He admits having written poor texts, but begs to judge the situation reasonably: nobody kills people for such things. Everything ends self-ironically, like in *Dorofoře*: despite very unfavorable circumstances, both characters, the writers, stay alive. Others die. In one novel it is a brother, in another, two hitmen who were supposed to kill the writer. The novel *Heresy* is quite funny to read. Its form is lovely and modest. I do not dare to say that Grajauskas just throws at us some unrelated impressions. *The Green* by Marius Ivaškevičius seems much less coherent and more mosaic than the novel by Grajauskas.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL MYTHS

Perhaps *The Green* by Ivaškevičius, like *Heresy* by Grajauskas, could be dubbed as a postmodern novel according to another criterion: postmodern writing is a writing that demystifies established myths and interprets national symbols in a new and playful way. Such postmodern writing is exemplified by the texts of Kostas Ostrauskas. Particularly memorable is his talented deconstruction of *The Drowned Maiden (Paskenduolė)* by Antanas Vienuolis. I read the play long ago, perhaps more than ten years ago. It was then that the first time I understood what postmodern writing was really about. Veronika wades into the lake. She will drown herself, but then she suddenly stops and changes her mind, turns back and joins the Vilnius University.

When one plays with a text created by somebody else – whether it is a literary fiction or a narrated myth – one can truly create something that could be called postmodernism. However, if one starts playing the same game with life, ‘making art’ from somebody’s painful wounds left by history,² still uncured and undeserved, then one creates not a postmodern game, but a cynical text, perhaps unexpectedly so to the author as well. I do not want to identify postmodernism with cynicism, out of respect for the former. A text as a fact of culture is something different from facts of life. A postmodern game, in my view, is playing with texts and cultural signs. In this sense the novel by Grajauskas, *Heresy*, meets the criteria of a postmodern game. It treats with irony both the writer’s profession and the omnipotence of reading. It plays with myths that were discussed and described by others long ago. Ivaškevičius fails in this. By seemingly reconstructing he deconstructs historical reality. In fact, in Ivaškevičius’s novel *The Green* nobody talks about reality either. When reading the novel we do not have an impression that he talks about live, real historical characters. Made-up characters do not have real experiences. The plot remind of a constructed computer game. I have borrowed this idea from Jolanta Kryževičienė, a presenter of the radio program “Culture Week”. I complained to her that I was slightly bored when reading *The Green*.³ I do not find real heroes, I do not grasp the main idea; I do not find irony or self-irony. I do not understand what the characters talk about with their lovers. There seem to be many erotic locutions but they are planted into the text like bits of lard into a ‘false rabbit’⁴: they never quite merge into the general fabric of events. Sometimes it is difficult to understand what is happening here, what the heroes are talking about and who shoots whom. I do not raise the issue of whether this incoherence is the author’s postmodern objective or whether this has just happened in the process of writing. Incoherence can sometimes be simply a sign of an unsuccessful novel. The novel will not become more suggestive simply because we label it with a plummy word ‘postmodern’.

A much more subtle example of a free interpretation of the past is an earlier book by Ivaškevičius, *Story from the Cloud* (*Istorija nuo debesies*, 1998). Here he plays not so much with reality as with historical Lithuanian legends and myths. Constantly changing perspectives of life and death create quite a lyrical mood of the Lithuanian nation wandering imperceptible roads between life and death, always in the rain. Being in the rain (*lietus*) becomes the

² A reference to the post-war period when Lithuanian partisans moved to forests (hence they were called ‘the green’) to fight against the Soviet regime, – translator’s note.

³ My judgment might be also determined by gender. I have never met a woman who liked the novel. Yet male readers accept it better. They manage to admire the author’s literary talent and quality of the text.

⁴ A Lithuanian dish made of minced meat and baked in the oven, – translator’s note.

very name of Lithuania (*Lietuva*). The mist spread by rain envelops historical realities (Mindaugas, Mažvydas, the story of Kražiai); Vilnius is like a stone washed by rain. The historical narrator himself speaks from the transcendental perspective of a cloud. It is not very important to whom exactly the text is addressed: “Hello again, my lost children, so carefully treading along the paths of the past and looking for a way to the cloud” (Ivaškevičius 1998: 174). Perhaps the dead and still living generations are meeting in the rain? However, this historical narrative is inserted into another story in which the real character, the writer, lives. Similarly to *Heresy* by Grajauskas stories from different levels are intertwined and inserted into each other. Yet the real space of the beginning of these stories remains recognizable: there is one privileged character – the writer creating these new tales. Since the novel by Ivaškevičius was published earlier than that of Grajauskas, it is possible that Grajauskas has borrowed the idea from Ivaškevičius. However, if the writer of Grajauskas begs the reader only for sympathy with his human frailty, the writer of Ivaškevičius evokes one’s sympathy with the first words of the book. It emerges that everything that will be written here will be his letter addressed to his diseased granny Petronėlė; this will be like a continuation of stories “from the cloud” that she used to tell him as a child. The grandmother used to fall asleep without having finished the stories she made up. The stories inserted into the novel are simply the ending of that unfinished story. “Death does not have an address,” the main narrator says. Thus the reader becomes the addressee of these stories. The plot of the novel acquires the value of a recognizable experience. In this novel Ivaškevičius creates a pagan-like community in which the living and the dead are united; he deletes the border between life and death: “Death brought him to the very end of the pier and put his foot into water. And the voice deep inside told him that it feels good to die. It is not scary to die; it is the same as to stand at the end of the pier and, having immersed one’s foot into water, moan how cold water is. But if you jump in you will be embraced. Cool and well, nobody would banish you back to the shore” (Ivaškevičius 1998: 50). I would not risk saying that in this novel Ivaškevičius only plays with signs. In a symbolic and encoded form he talks of fundamental things.

However, Ivaškevičius’s most successful attempt to give a new life to the past is probably his play *Madagascar* (*Madagaskaras*, 2004). Some characters of the play, like in *The Green*, have historical prototypes, people who really lived. In this very good-humored play⁵ they become unavoidably parodied. Yet the play does not become cynical because of this; it rather conveys a tender interest in remarkable personalities who lived here long ago (like the granny Petronėlė in *Story from the Cloud*). Geographer and dreamer Ka-

⁵ A successful production by director Rimas Tuminas and exhilarating acting.

zimieras Pakštas becomes Pokštas here, and the exalted poet Salė reminds of Salomėja Neris. A creator's ideas or attitudes no longer belong only to him/her, but become facts of common culture. In new interpretations they can acquire new meanings. Life marked with blood, historical injustice and violent death is something quite different. Some things are funny, while others are not. *Madagascar* makes us laugh – because of its use of old-fashioned Lithuanian idiom that sounds peculiar today, because of the paradoxically idealist characters who are in search for themselves in abstract projects, and because of dialogues woven by the talented author. Salė is exalted as she is waiting for an exceptional, unexpected love of her life: “I don't know when and where he will climb into me. Maybe he is already standing behind the door. Maybe he is still walking on the street. Maybe he is not born yet. Maybe he is dying in the most dismal hospital and is suffering horribly” (Ivaškevičius 2004: 30). The episode depicting the meeting of Salė and Pokštas is very playful. Salė with her friend Milė wade in the sea and see Pokštas. Salė is excited: maybe it's him. Milė, Salė's friend, says to Pokštas: “Salė feels uncomfortable when a well-made man grinds his attention into her”. Pokštas answers: “I like to stand facing the sea”. Milė is not put off: “In this case, it's the same. Monsieur, you are shamelessly facing Salė. And when you are staring at her like this, Salė feels as if she is naked”. The statesman Pokštas is not groping for words: “It would be utterly unforgivable if Lithuania, just out of prudence, turns away from the sea again” (Ivaškevičius 2004: 33). In *Madagascar* Ivaškevičius cajoles the reader, and this is mere pop, while *The Green* is real literature, as a correspondent of mine tries to convince me, critic and writer himself. To my mind, the attractiveness of a literary work should not belittle its value. Ivaškevičius finds a new form through which history can reach contemporary readers and viewers. Such writing, even if outrageous, does not let the past rot on its own and remain just a fact mentioned in history and literature textbooks. In this it is, of course, postmodern. However, as much as it engages us or makes us laugh, it is still nourished by reality. Thus, even if it is postmodern, it is not postmodern to the end.

SELF-IRONY AND CHANGING PARAMETERS OF TIME AND SPACE

We will persevere with our search for the criteria of a postmodern novel. We will try to approach it from still another perspective. I now read Ona Bartkutė's review of *Heresy* by Grajauskas, “(Her)etic Erotics of Erosion” (“(Er)etiška erozijos erotica”) in which she tries to define what is intrigue in a postmodern literary work. The intrigue is manifested “only through playful self-reflection of an ironic and self-ironic narrator changing the parameters of space and time, varying points of view and roles” (Bartkutė 2005: 4).

The novel by Grajauskas can indeed be called postmodern according to this conception of postmodern literature. What is more, such a definition reveals a wider perspective on Lithuanian postmodern literature extending beyond *Heresy* by Grajauskas.

Narrators of Gavelis and Ivanauskaitė were the first to vary points of view. Even to alternate between life and death. Both in *The Life of Sundzu in the Sacred City of Vilnius* and in *Placebo* the narrator exposes events from the otherworldly perspective. *Placebo* does not flinch from looking at what is happening from a cat's point of view. We see that the narrator Julija is quite ironic. She perceives the world light-heartedly. Yet the target of her irony is not herself but others. She did not like women but wanted to be liked by men. And, obviously, she liked herself most of all. Even when dead she felt superior, as a lover, to her only friend Rita. The narrator is strong and confident. In the other world, she does not feel as if she has lost her life like heroes-writers of *Doriforė* or *Heresy*. In *Placebo* Ivanauskaitė does not yet create a self-ironic narrator. However, she uses the trope of irony very widely. Self-irony appears in her next novel, *Fortress of Sleeping Butterflies*. The plot of this novel is coherent and well stringed. Points of time and space do not change here. The main character Monika is self-ironic. She and other characters (the prostitutes, in particular) are quite forthright.

The self-ironic narrator has been gaining ground in recent Lithuanian literature. Such a narrator directs the point of his or her irony primarily at himself/herself. This is perhaps the supreme form of irony. It is not novelists who have developed the trope of self-irony, but writers in 'minor genres': poets (e.g. poet Marčėnas) and personal essayists. The genre was initiated by Rolandas Rastauskas and Herkus Kunčius, and continued by Sigitas Geda, Sigitas Parulskis, Giedra Radvilavičiūtė, Alfonsas Andriuškevičius and Gintaras Grajauskas. Then various authors of the cultural weekly *Šiaurės Atėnai* joined in: Giedrė Kazlauskaitė, Danutė Kalinauskaitė and Darius Klibavičius. When they start writing novels personal essayists bring to the genre their experience of self-ironic writing (Parulskis, Kunčius, Grajauskas). If a postmodernist in literature is defined as self-ironically caricaturing not only his/her personal but also professional basis – the writing itself, then we can find quite a lot of such postmodernist authors. For instance, the protagonist of Marčėnas's poems feels the existential indeterminacy of his actions, hovering between spaces and worlds of different status. The poet really comes out to be "<...> neither devil nor a cuckoo/ neither worker nor intellectual,/ nor Danish Prince, both straight and bent,/ not knowing whether to be or not to be," as he writes in the poem *Creations (Kūrybos)* (Marčėnas 2005: 36). In his review of the latest book by Marčėnas, *Worlds (Pasauliai)*, poet and literary critic Marcelijus Martinaitis cannot avoid the word 'postmo-

dern'. Martinaitis says that Marčėnas's poetry can be linked both to classical cannons and to postmodernism. Marčėnas is bold in his predilection for 'old fashioned' rhymes, and he even refers to his book *Worlds* as 'lyrics', using the word that has already disappeared from postmodern usage. "However, he somehow sloughs off these cannons when he goes out to the street, to countryside, to Mežiūškės, to midnight solitude and his *vers libre* transforms into mundane language" (Martinaitis 2005: 4). Martinaitis tends to consider as postmodern Marčėnas' use of varied means of expression as well as his light, elegant rhyming, which allows covering a wide spectrum of moods, subjects and nuances without stumbling on formalities.

If we follow the criterion for understanding postmodernism as suggested by Martinaitis, then talented personal essayists also have the ability to describe the mundane lightly and elegantly by covering a spectrum of most diverse subjects and nuances. In this sense they could also be called postmodernists. Yet I would add the aforementioned talent for self-irony as an additional necessary criterion. The author parodies not only himself, but also the writer's profession in general.

"I do not write novels because I am weak and old," says the narrator of Rastauskas's essay "Cloaca of the Sentence" ("Sakinio kloaka"). Such a modest attitude of the narrator is imposing: "I am a squaddie of the sentence. The sentence is my freedom and my salvation. The corps of the text is my blight" (Rastauskas 2004: 177). However, the essayist awards the power of global judgment to his hero; he even asks himself how he imagines contemporary Lithuanian novel. And he answers: "It is a schizophrenic kind of literature. At best, it is possible to create a novel about writing a novel, i.e. about how it is impossible to write a novel" (Rastauskas 2004: 175). As we have noticed, Parulskis has written a novel about how it is impossible to write a novel (*Doriforė*). Grajauskas has also created a parody novel about a bad writer as seen by a hitman: "'he will be buried with orchestra, while we will be laid under somewhere at the hedge; nobody will ever find our grave,' Keisas was enjoying his drunken rage. 'And what has he done so far? What has he done in his life? Nothing! He has written a lot of rubbish and he cannot understand the stuff himself'" (Grajauskas 2005: 221).

Literary critics diagnosing the crisis of contemporary Lithuanian novel can relax and have a rest. Narrators created by the writers diagnose themselves the crisis of their own writing, the inability to write a good novel, and the fundamental redundancy of their profession in general. They even uncover graver diagnoses. For instance, the narrator of Parulskis's essay "Acting but Redundant" ("Veikiantis, bet nereikalingas"), does not say as the subject of Rastauskas's essays does that the writer is schizophrenic, yet he diagnoses something else: 'confabulation'. This is a psychopathological phenomenon of fil-

ling the gaps of memory with made-up events and fantasies. Someone with the psychopathology inserts things he/she has imagined into the narration of past events. This is particularly characteristic of patients with the Korsakov syndrome. Since 'filling the gaps of memory' is a trait of all writers the narrator draws the conclusion that all writers have this condition (Parulskis 2002b: 57).

However, another problem arises here. Although contemporary Lithuanian essay writing is based on self-irony as the main trope, personal essay writing avoids the shifting of space and time. Surely, in this case the text, like any other text, is written and thus is constructed. Yet this is done from a personal perspective, a real perspective experienced by the author. And it is even not important what kinds of events are narrated in an essayist's text: whether they are real facts or fantasies and moments of experience that have never happened. The narrator of an essay always seems to be very real and alive. He/she attracts the reader precisely because of his/her reality.

IS AN ESSAYIST A POSTMODERNIST?

I will answer at once: essay writing can be both postmodern and belong to experience. I call the latter personal. Rastauskas, Radvilavičiūtė, Andriuškevičius and Parulskis are personal essayists, although they insert literary and cultural allusions into the fabric of their text woven from experience.

Examples of such interweaving are evident in an essay by Alfonsas Andriuškevičius, "Life with Japanese Women" ("Gyvenimas su japonėmis"), and by Radvilavičiūtė, "Attraction of the Text" ("Teksto trauka"). The narrator of Andriuškevičius' essay "Life with Japanese Women" reads a diary written by a lady from the Japanese Emperor's palace and plays an identification game with its heroes: not with the woman Idzumi Sikibu, but with one of her lovers, prince Atsumiti. The narrator identifies himself with him absolutely, then partially and finally dissociates: he wonders what he, imagining his life with Idzumi Sikibu, would do himself, what he could do partially and what he could not do at all. It so happens that wishing to disguise himself Atsumiti travels to Idzumi in a female palanquin. At this juncture the narrator protests, stating unambiguously "no way!" and reveals his masculine nature opposed to any transvestism. The narrator is also very skeptical of the prince's idea of asking his new lover, acknowledging her superior poetic talent, to write a farewell poem to his former lover. I like the narrator's confession that to him the prince's habit of signing other people's verses with his own name is disgusting; as he expresses this himself with ironic elegance, "complete non-egocentricity" (Andriuškevičius 2004: 139). The narrator's humane reliability is thus demonstrated. The narrator then reveals certain aspects of his own idea of masculine honor as he opposes

the prince's design to house his wife and lover under one roof, moving the latter for one day into his palace. The narrator is appalled by the prince's lies when he tells his wife that he has moved his lover to the palace so that she could serve him, combing his hair, and suggests his wife also to find some work for her. Thus, at the end of the essay the reader sees the prince making a complete fool of himself as his wife leaves him, and after a year his lover Idzumi Sikibu marries, for some reason, someone else. We do not know why, the narrator does not go into details. However, the prince's loss is a gain for the narrator. Having lived in a virtual space for a year, intruding as 'an unwanted third' into intimate interpersonal relationships of Idzumi Sikibu and prince Atsumiti, the narrator, as a character of Herkus Kunčius would say, "has enriched his soul": understood something about himself and revealed this to his reader. Besides, he also hit also another target: the reader was comfortably and charmingly introduced into a new cultural experience, that of a life-style in the Japanese court at the beginning of the 11th century. However, I would not call this essay postmodern because experience outweighs everything else; the reader does not lose the traces of the 'live narrator'. Such traces do not disappear in Radvilavičiūtė's essay "Attraction of the Text" either. All the criteria of suggestiveness that the author used in her text: retrospective return to memory, closeness to the reader's experience, the reader's total immersion in the text and the ability to reveal banal things in a new way, are linked to her real life experiences. One gets the impression that the text is attached to the narrator's life like a dreamy insect attracted to a source of light. The source of light is the narrator's talented grasp of life and her experience, her ability to see and interpret that experience in a unique way, without any premeditated criteria. Criteria seem to come later. Quotations of texts by other authors dissolve in the newly created fabric of the text. At the end of the essay the narrator covers the imaginary lens of the TV camera with honey brought from her relative Emilija. She has learned the code – covering an orifice in a tree to which a secret has been told – from a movie from Far East. Yet this cultural code does not become very significant. Neither do the texts by E. Tode, H. Murakami or R.M. Rilke. The reader is attracted by the narrator's inner struggle with the mystery of life and death, her tremor in the search of the fifth criterion and her fear of public spaces. The essay testifies that an attractively created text eliminates all other texts infused by the narrator. This is why this essay by Radvilavičiūtė is not postmodern either. Radvilavičiūtė does not become a postmodernist even when the narrator of her essay "Hello" ("Sveika") starts thinking directly of postmodernism. The narrator is thinking about the dream she has just dreamt, remembers Baudrillard who wrote that dreams were produced, and makes a playful conclusion: "somebody must have planted this one for me". Then the

chain of associations develops along the trajectory suggested by Baudrillard: “One can only guess as to who and why. He also wrote that wherever we were, we lived in a universe sometimes similar to the original, and illusion became impossible because reality was impossible” (Radvilavičiūtė 2004: 131). In the same essay the narrator reflects on the relationship between reality and illusion at some length. She analyses M. McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media* where the author considers the differences between a citizen and a nomad. She agrees with his argument: “Art has been replaced by a dream. Happiness, by pleasure. Achievements, by éclat. Truth as passion, by passion as truth. Drama, by pornography. Heterosexuality, by the polymorphous. And literature, by journalism. Damned postmodernism has wrecked it all” (Radvilavičiūtė 2004: 121). Postmodernism as a phenomenon seems to be the object of reflection here, but the essay does not become postmodern because of this as it is written from a perspective of distance dictated by experience. Likewise Rastauskas in the essay “New York from a Foot’s Flight View” (“Niujorkas iš kojų skrydžio”) from his book *Another World (Kitas pasaulis)* weaves in long fragments of another text into his essay (one by Czesław Miłosz dedicated to Allen Ginsburg and translated by Rastauskas). However, reality has not disappeared. The narrator is recognizable; he is all ‘here’ at this particular moment, in New York.

In his postmodern essays, Kunčius, on the contrary, places the narrator beyond the perspective of time and space. He is not contextual, but rather floats amid different images of culture. I think this disappearance of the context of time and space is one of characteristics of postmodern art. In her book *Anamorphoses: Non-Fundamental Problems of Philosophy (Anamorfozės: nepamatinės filosofijos problemos)*, Audronė Žukauskaitė says much the same by referring to contemporary research into postmodernism: “in postmodern reality all events lack definite time and place, their true essence” (Žukauskaitė 2005: 58). Kunčius creates postmodern essays because in contrast to personal essayists listed here he not so much interweaves texts with reality, but constructs such essays exclusively from cultural allusions. He parodies the very possibility of the narrator’s real identity. In postmodern essays the ‘experiential’ narrator withdraws. Cultural allusions, references to others’ texts and play gradually take over.

Postmodernists distance themselves from the past and so-called life because they enjoy playing with allusions generated by the signs of diverse cultures. Kunčius plays with these symbols so perfectly that in this playfulness he surpasses classical postmodernism as he has also distanced himself from the latter. He plays already with postmodernism. His essay “My Adopted Stepsister Manuela Gretkowska” (“Mano įdukrinta netikra sesuo Manuela Gretkowska”) offers the image of Umberto Eco behind bars in some Eastern

European prison together with hardened recidivists. The narrator thinks that he could really test the universality of semiotics here. He suggests imagining that Umberto Eco says to his cellmates: “There are seven hundred names of God”. And then starts listing them all. “How long would they let him doing this?” asks the narrator. “At which name would they interrupt him? Besides, how would they interrupt him?” The narrator is interested in whether Umberto Eco would survive in this extreme situation. He enjoys these mental experiments – as if he was only thinking, not living. I come to the conclusion: Herkus Kunčius is the only of aforementioned writers who has created the postmodern essay genre. All other personal essayists can be considered postmodern only according to the concept of writing suggested by Martinaitis, with self-irony added by me. I would, however, separate writing based on experience from postmodern writing. Writing based on experience is modern. Postmodernism has changed the relationship between reality (no matter what kind of reality, subjective or objective) and the text that describes it. Postmodernism has emerged from the idea that a sign, in this case a word or a text, can no longer say anything about reality. It no longer speaks of truth as a reflection of reality (even as refracted by imagination). We see the world only through perspectives of shadows and illusions cast by it. Thus postmodern writers play with the signs of language and symbols of culture. Texts refer to other texts and multiply each other. Irony, grotesque and caricature are called for. Eclectics and collage are welcome. Simulacra displace experience. This is the game played in some works by Herkus Kunčius. It is here that the perspectives of time and space get changed; disordered, plotless writing appears; characters emerge whose prototypes are not to be sought in reality. One can also notice similar tendencies in Gavelis’ novels and in Ivanauskaitė’s *Placebo*. On the criterion as I have defined it here, I could not refer even to aforementioned personal essayists and writers as postmodern. I would rather call them modernists or ‘followers of experience’. Postmodern culture is oriented towards a secondary entity – the text – not to reality. Meanwhile authors discussed here are cautiously and carefully to slide towards reality, not illusion.

I find similar insights in the book *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (ed. Edmund J. Smyth, 1991). Modernist literature, it is argued there, was based on a realist representation of subjectivity, with the world constructed either within consciousness or with the help of consciousness. It was focused on the stream of consciousness, experience of time and memory, and the influence of the unconscious on conscious experiences. Modern writers were Proust, Joyce and Woolf. Modern literature was based on the premise that literature still represented something: some flashes of existence (Woolf), reflex memory (Proust) or epiphanic moments of insight (Joyce). Umberto

Eco introduced the concept of 'the open work'. The openness of the work is the fundamental ambiguity of artistic message. Eco thinks that this is a constant in all works of art of all times. He considers the two novels by Joyce: *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* as well as Kafka's works as perfect examples of 'the open work'. Kafka uses symbols: trial, castle, waiting, passing sentence, metamorphosis and torture, not to be understood literally, that create an indefinite message, open to new reactions and reflections. Joyce's *Ulysses* eliminates the one-directional flow of time in the coherent space, while in *Finnegans Wake* he has created an endless cosmos from the ambiguity of words (see: Eco 1989: 9-11).

Modernism seems not to have fully parted with the past. Yet when we pass from modernism to postmodernism the concept of artistic space as a constructed world changes. For modernists it is the subject who creates the world; for postmodernists, it is the language. However, the language no longer represents anything. It feeds on, experiments and plays with itself. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a typical example of a postmodern novel, and *Ulysses* are still assigned to modernist literature by some critics. Modernist subjective writing can create a double context in which an episode might appear both as a fragment and as a meaningful part of a written text. A narrative connects scattered fragments of experience into the total whole. Postmodernism disrupts the perception that events are embedded in common time and turns it into 'the present of the past'. It does this with irony. Old forms become parody and pastiche. We see this also in the play of Herkus Kunčius *Matas* recently staged by the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre. In postmodernism subjectivity is replaced by a certain cosmic point of view. Modern literature comprises various pluralist views, but they are synthesized and controlled by one privileged interpreter. Writing based on experience by the essayists discussed here shows this very clearly. In postmodern literature, by contrast, independent pluralist discourses coexist. Pluralism of contexts is fragmented. One can notice that Western literary theorists have made use of the philosophers' insights in defining the criteria of the postmodern work of art. They are impressed by the idea of the disintegration of a coherent overall narrative as introduced by Jean-François Lyotard (Mephram 1991: 145). To summarize, a work of modern fiction creates a single world with numerous interpretations, while a postmodern work speaks of many unrelated worlds. To my mind, the personal essay is a genre close to modern literature.

KUNČIUS: A POSTMODERN ABSURD NOVEL

Herkus Kunčius transfers the experience of postmodern essay writing not only to his plays, but also to his novels. More than ten years ago I reviewed a

book by five authors, *Lithuanian Shift: Essays on Culture, Politics and Society* (ed. Almantas Samalavičius, 1994), published in English. Kunčius was one of the five. I wrote in the review: “The lyrical hero of H. Kunčius is, as usual, very pleasant and, for some reason differently from writings by this author in Lithuanian, he plays very little with erotic paradoxes. He is focused on the search for experiences of an authentic world. ‘I am happy to exist – to be... I like this,’ such would be the hero’s philosophical explanation to those who would not understand this purposeless wandering at the point x in the world just with a cigarette between his lips and his father’s old unbuttoned coat. I would like to follow him because he frees himself from the tiring tension of the demanding, goal-setting world <...>. H. Kunčius’s hero is free: the present is boring to him, but history opens as a space of a possible play of imagination still in hand. ‘Sometimes I am a soldier in the battle of Verdun, sometimes I am an astrologist or aristocrat in a prestigious, yet bourgeois, salon of Paris,’ he says. That hero of H. Kunčius is also somewhat even happy: he does not suffer; he is not torn by contradictions. It is not he who gets mad; the surrounding world gets mad. He only observes it with his sober gaze of a connoisseur who knows his worth. The statement “absurdity, madness and stupidity simply thrive here” should be applied to the world in general. If we want to stretch H. Kunčius to the general idea of ‘Lithuanian shift,’ we could say: look what postmodernist Lithuanian essay writing is like” (Baranova 1995: 41).

Many years have passed since. Kunčius is an exceptionally productive writer: he has published a collection of essayist prose *The Mirth of the Full Moon* (*Pilnaties linksmybės*, 1999), *My Struggle Bambino* (*Mano kova Bambino*), novels: *Past Continuous Time* (*Būtasis dažnininis kartas*, 1998), *Ashes in a Hoof of an Ass* (*Pelenai asilo kanopoje*, 2001, written in 1996), *Brain Dressing* (*Smegenų padažas*, 2001, written in 1997-1998), *Excursion Casa Matta* (*Ekskursija: Casa Matta*, 2001, written in 1998), *The Tumulus of Cocks* (*Gaidžių milžinkapis*, 2004). Some novels, *The Ground Will Always Give a Shelter* (*Ir dugnas visada priglaus*, 1996), *Matka Pitka* (1998) and *Not to Spare Dushanski* (*Nepagailėti Dušanskio*, 2004)⁶ were published by the *Metai* magazine; in 2006 they were published as a book. The play *Studio of Genius* (*Genijaus dirbtuvė*) was staged by the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre. In 2002 his novel *Ornament* (*Ornamentas*) was published. What has remained constant, what has become dated and what novelties have emerged in Kunčius’ prose after all these years? I can say this at once: the charming, carelessly happy, joyous narrator of Kunčius’s essayist prose, after having walked around some of his essays (“Flying Zeppelin II” (“Skraidantis cepelinas II”), “The Glow of the Near North” (“Artimos šiaurės pašvaistė”)), appeared in

⁶ The critic Algimantas Bučys has written more exhaustively on this novel by Kunčius – almost in a post-modern manner (i. e. freely, as ‘it writes to him’) (see: Bučys 2006).

the novel *Past Continuous Time* (*Būtais dažninis kartas*) and was dropped there. In the following four novels, there is no trace of him. There is no longer any opposition or distance between the joyous narrator who enjoys life and the crazy world. There is only the crazy world left. It is not clear where this narrator, whom many readers have come to like, has disappeared: has he 'died' like Nietzsche's God? Departed for other, better, lands or times? Or simply merged with the stupidity and madness of the external world, seeing no sense in resistance? Dissolved in absurdity? Enjoying absurdity? Perhaps the author has decided to describe the madness of the world to the fullest extent, in order to create a grotesque of total meaninglessness. As the narrator disappears from 'here and now' the novels are woven by using the author's favorite play of changing imaginary historical perspectives. The plot becomes obsolete. The action is driven by pure text. The reader is waiting for some coda or all-explaining and legitimizing end. This is like waiting for Godot. Such writing is not even a deconstruction of meaning, but destruction *par excellence*. It seems to be done not so much by the hand of the author as by the hand of the world. Kunčius lets the madness of the world speak for itself, sure, by strengthening and caricaturizing its voice, revealing what is rough, mordant, meaningless and forbidding in it. Reality has everything in it: Kunčius wrenches out and magnifies some selected aspects of it. Magnified, absurdity becomes easier to recognize. In one of his interviews Kunčius says that he is now more interested in physical and psychological violence than in love. The "naïve sadism" he is writing about is something people experience in daily life; he finds it described in crime news, hears stories from the director of Panevėžys women's jail: for instance, that of a woman who stabbed thirty knife blows into her tiresome husband, apparently without any reason. Kunčius comments: "There is no need to look for some deep motivation of this particular act, for like in my literature life is simply just such. And I am interested in it" (see: Jonušys, Kunčius 2004: 3)

Kunčius' novels seem to meet almost all the criteria of postmodern literature discussed here. The "everything is allowed" criterion is valid, as his writing does not avoid shocking sexual and horror scenes. This also the 'free', relaxed writing for the sake of writing without structuring the text and without creating an intrigue or pseudo-intrigue, as pointed out by Jurgutienė, exemplified by the uproar of preparations for the funeral of Kaštonė the Mare in his novel *Excursion Casa matta*. Finally, ever since the time of his essayist prose Kunčius has enjoyed the play of mixing the perspectives of different historical epochs, times and spaces. He transfers this predilection to his novels. The action of a novel usually takes place not at a particular point in time and space, but only in a text created by the writer. If the narrator ever emerges, alongside the characters of the novel, he is unavoidably ironic and self-ironic.

There is indeed an abundance of ‘traumatic’ grotesque and irony in Kunčius’ ‘absurd’ novels. The story of *Ashes in a Hoof of an Ass* is told from the perspective of an experienced executioner. He considers himself very positive, even sentimental: he loves Marta, he writes modest letters to her. He enjoys life and is intent on self-education. The narrator says: “I have everything I need. When I have a free minute and lie down and read existentialists, I often think about existence. I am interested in this. My horizon is wide; I have time left for self-education without which one cannot live these days” (Kunčius 2001: 10). We can clearly hear the tone of Kunčius’ self-ironic narrator. Yet in this novel, it is precisely the ‘horror scenes’ (in the wording of Venclova) that create the distance of a playful game. For instance, the narrator tortures Marta seeing her no longer as Marta but as a witch. He offers her not love, but forelocks to be hammered into her chest. The torturer says this to his beloved: “This is the stake which will be hammered in and will pierce your sinful heart.” He then describes what is in wait for the girl in detail: “First I will starve you, torture you with thirst; you will suffer in the damp cellar where rats will gnaw you and insects will sting. You will dream of the stake pierced into your heart as salvation. The hangman’s rope will become your most desired bride. The knife of guillotine will become the groom of your dreams.” The narrator recites this in succession and repeatedly hits her with a cane over her wounds. I cannot accuse the writer for nurturing pervert fantasies or cultivating sadomasochist impulses. Unless there has never been a woman in history who was similarly tortured to death and unless the executioner’s profession was not real. Alas, it was not Kunčius who invented it. There have been more scenes of cruelty in the world than Kunčius has described in his novel. Kunčius would perhaps say that though we may abhor such a world, this is how it is. Yet despite these possible parallels this text seems to be written from a cosmic perspective. The writer’s narrator simply reincarnates in the executioner’s mind. He plays with its possible ambiguity. The cosmic perspective and relaxed writing where “everything is allowed” and all boundaries transgressed are the features that are even more prominent in another novel by Kunčius, *The Tumulus of Cocks*. The action is like that in a science fiction movie. During the thaw icicles become very dangerous; when they fall, people die; there is no development of action in time or space. A parody of sadism is recreated here as well: starting a crime investigation inspector Svajūnas Kudriašovas cuts off his female client’s foot. Apparently, in order to make it more similar to the deficiency of her dance partner who has disappeared; it comes out that he has just one foot. The reader looking for some logical connections – why was this necessary – would spend his effort in vain. One could only expect them from a classical crime novel. Svajūnas Kudriašovas as a detective is a peculiar one: he has the Down

syndrome, yet he has graduated a prestigious university and has distinguished himself in intelligence service. Subsequently, discredited for some reason, he was brought back to his homeland and now has a private practice. Thus, there is no coherent plot here. Heroes from various epochs mix here: Duke Oginskis, Virgilijus Pacas and young Čiurlionis. Homosexual relationships thrive. They are treated with irony: “the kiss was damp, but sweet” – this is how the author describes the erotic intimacy between Duke Oginskis and Hetman Pacas. I could not retell the story of the novel: although there is action the story is nonexistent, nothing meaningful or recognizable happens; events are not related through cause-effect chains. I cannot say that reading this novel I experienced the same pleasure as I did with Kunčius’ earlier novel, *Past Continuous Time*, where the narrator is still very close to the author telling his impressions of charmingly ‘doing nothing’ in Paris. As a reader I regret Kunčius’ turn from writing based on experience to postmodern writing. Yet as the author of the present quest I am relieved: thank God, there is at least one real postmodernist in Lithuanian literature. I do not think that postmodern writing is privileged writing. I like writing based on experience, but I understand that it is possible to write in many different ways. Writers do experiments and perhaps do them consciously.

One postmodernist for the entire contemporary Lithuanian literature – is it a lot or very little? Those who do not like postmodernism can be relieved: thank God, only one. Those who admire it may be disappointed. I am happy having found at least one according to the criteria I have used. A researcher who defines them differently would perhaps find more of them. I would agree to call the novel by Gintaras Beresnevičius *Paruzija* (Beresnevičius 2005) postmodern, but I doubt whether it is correct to refer to the first novel (2005) of this productive essayist and religious studies scholar as the first postmodern novel. Not only Kunčius is a postmodern writer; as we have seen, other professional writers have traveled the trajectory of postmodernism before: Gavelis, Ivanauskaitė, Ivaškevičius and Grajauskas. As Sprindytė has pointed out, Kunčius is simply “our most coherent postmodernist”.⁷

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⁷ After having written this text and read it at the Šviesa Santara conference in Chicago I found an article by Sprindytė (2002: 37-51). In this article the critic raises the question whether it is possible to use the concept of ‘postmodernism’ to discuss contemporary processes in literature. She deplores the indefinite usage of this concept and yet ends with the discussion of Kunčius as the most coherent postmodernist.

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POSTMODERNIZMAS LIETUVIŲ LITERATŪROJE

SANTRAUKA

Ar egzistuoja postmodernioji literatūra Lietuvoje? Ar mes tiesiog vartojame tokią sąvoką „postmodernizmas“ ir taikome ją literatūrai? Jei vartojame vien tik sąvoką – kokių tikslų ją vartojame? Jei vis dėlto postmodernizmas lietuvių literatūroje egzistuoja ir kaip reiškinys, o ne vien tik kaip sąvoka, kaip jį aptikti ir atpažinti? Kaip deskriptyviai aprašyti? Straipsnio autorė aptaria įvairias galimas Lietuvos kultūros diskurse susiklosčiusias postmodernizmo literatūroje sampratos variacijas. Tomas Venclova pasiremia Leszoku Kolkowskiu ir sako, kad postmodernioji literatūra rašoma pagal principą „viskas leista“ (nuo šokiruojančių seksualinių ar siaubo scenų, nuo principinio kičo ar neskonybės ligi tokio svetimų tekstų naudojimo, kuris anksčiau buvo vadinamas plagiatu). Autorė reziūmuoja, kad šis apibrėžimas ne deskriptyvus, o vertybinis, nes iš anksto implikuoja neigiamą postmoderniosios literatūros moralinį angažuotumą: kičą, neskonybę, plagiatą ir siaubą. Kita vertus, Aušra Jurgutienė renkasi kitą kelią. Ji seka Umberto Eco, kuris postmodernų kūrinį interpretuoja kaip atvirą tekstą. Tokiame romane pasakojimas praranda centrą ir linijinę siužeto kryptį. Jį galima skaityti nuo bet kurios vietos, nes jame kuriamas pasaulis be ribų ir be įprastų kaitos dėsnų. Jame neat-siveria jokia prasmė. Toks romanas eksponuoja pabirus tvirčiau semantiškai nesuregztus vaizdus. Estetinis efektas pasiekiamas iš nerišlios mozaikos. Trečia vertus, yra sakoma, kad postmodernus rašymas yra rašymas, kuris demistifikuoja nusistovėjusius mitus, kuris naujai ir žaismingai interpretuoja tautinę simboliką. Ketvirta, teigiama, kad postmodernaus kūrinio intriga atsiskleidžianti tik per kaitaliojančio žiūros taškus, keičiančio erdvės ir laiko parametrus bei vaidmenis ironiško ir autoironiško pasakotojo žaismingą autorefleksiją. Autorė peržvelgia šių kriterijų aspektu personaliąją eseistiką ir prieina prie išvados, kad personalieji eseistai yra modernistai, išskyrus Herkų Kunčių. Kunčius savo postmoderniose esė patalpina pasakotoją anapus laiko ir erdvės perspektyvos. Jis nėra kontekstualus, o plūduriuoja tarp skirtingų kultūros įvaizdžių. Autorė mano, kad šis laiko ir erdvės konteksto išnykimas yra vienas iš postmodernaus meno kūrinio bruožų. Be to, ir Kunčiaus romanai leidžia jį kvalifikuoti kaip nuosekliausią šiuolaikinės lietuvių literatūros postmodernistą.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: postmodernizmas, modernizmas, lietuvių literatūra, atviras kūrinys, autoironija.