



**Almantas Samalavicius**

## Literary perspectives: Lithuania

*Almost normal*

The literary field in Lithuania has established itself since independence, despite vastly smaller print runs and the onslaught of the mass media. Today, a range of literary approaches can be made out, writes Almantas Samalavicius, from the black humour and social criticism of the middle generation to the more private, realistic narratives of the post-Soviet generation.

Barely twenty years have passed, and the Lithuanian writers who once proclaimed the truth to thousands of their fellow citizens crowded into parks and squares, who once prophesized freedom to their country, now find themselves on the margins of public life. As elsewhere in central and eastern Europe during the fall of the Iron Curtain, writers (like all other intellectuals) performed an impressive but short-lived role as the political vanguard. Soon appeared on the public political scene other, more pragmatic individuals, whose talent lay in offering economically concrete and realistic ideas rather than the abstract categories of freedom. Those writers who still spoke in brave but somewhat nebulous metaphors were forced to realize that their hour in politics was nothing more than a passing moment.

Since then, Lithuanian society has undergone many changes. After the events of January 1991 — when Soviet troops in Vilnius murdered thirteen peaceful civilians who protested against military rule, after which an economic blockade was imposed on Lithuania — there was a hasty and in most cases unjust redistribution of former "people's property" in an atmosphere of "wild" capitalism. That developments in a post-communist society in a transitory stage could not be foreseen was natural. Sadly, social life in the country took the usual course and many mistakes were made. Writers with no previous experience of political activities failed to gain it under post-communism. After the political euphoria of *Sąjūdis* (the Lithuanian reform movement, which led the struggle for independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s) had died down and new social and economic problems surfaced, most writers returned to their usual work and started to take part in the processes of political normalization and the creation of a civic society. But they no longer played a leading part. They acted not as spokespersons for democracy, but as ordinary citizens, in some cases, *commenting* on this development in newspapers and, later, on the Internet. No wonder that the public voice of writers became weaker and only occasionally audible. Mass media chose to focus attention on writers and literature only when someone belonging to the literary "guild" became an object of some scandal.

A few years after the reestablishment of independence, it seemed as if literature was destined to die slowly and painfully: the circulation of books and

literary periodicals went down, despite the fact that the period was marked by the growth of a number of new and as a rule short-lived publishing houses. However, after a half dozen years or so, the literary climate started to improve and publishers began to claim that the literary market had become *almost normal*: sales of literary fiction grew again, and each year more and more novels and short story and essay collections by Lithuanian writers appeared. Complaints that perhaps Lithuanian authors had written too few manuscripts for the "drawers" (i.e. intended never to be published) during the Soviet era ceased, and many young authors surfaced on the literary scene. Despite occasional swings, a stable and more or less satisfactory market for Lithuanian literature came into being.

How does it look today? Despite the fact that the print runs for literary fiction are generally lower than twenty years ago (a tendency that seems to be common to all central and eastern European countries), the market is in fact fairly stable. Literary events like the international Vilnius Book Fair, which draws large crowds, are undeniable proof that literature continues to be important.

Yet it is hard to imagine that just twenty years ago, a collection of poems by a renowned exile poet was published (and sold) in a print run of almost one hundred thousand copies. From the perspective of a *normal* western citizen, such a print run for a book of poetry exceeds the imagination. These days, poetry sells far more modestly, but still manages to retain its symbolic value and quality (as testified by numerous translations into other languages), and has a constant readership. However, as in most countries, almost no poet in Lithuania makes a living from poetry. A certain economic stability for poets and writers of other genres is provided by government scholarships annually awarded for writing.

Freedom has its own price, and this applies to books too.

### Uncompromising, shocking prose

Ricardas Gavelis' novel *Vilniaus pokeris* (*Vilnius poker*) was published in Lithuania in 1989 with a print run of one hundred thousand copies — a precedent most unlikely to be matched in forthcoming decades. Probably the biggest challenge conceivable to a drowsy Lithuanian literary climate on the eve of the re-establishment of independence, *Vilniaus pokeris* caused a stormy reaction immediately after publication. Written for the "drawer" (the manuscript was hidden by the author's most intimate friends until it was finally published; he never revealed their names even until his untimely death in 2002), the anti-narcissistic and anti-heroic novel was concerned not only with the essence of totalitarian power (the striving for absolute power and control is personified by "THEM", eternal conspirators against humanity from the times of Plato), it also described a new type of human being, one created by Lithuanian culture and the Soviet system alike. This *homo lithuanicus* outgrew its Big Brother (*homo sovieticus*) in narrow-mindedness, meekness, inactivity and cowardice, and cultivated a destructive, hypocritical pride in national symbols and history (the symbol of power of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy, the tower of Vilnius Upper Castle, is for example described as a puny blunt phallus). The capital of Lithuania is depicted as a mortally ill, maimed and decaying urban body, where the inhabitants are strangers to each other and lead their mean lives overcome by external power and their own inner feeling of powerlessness. They compensate for their impotence by torturing their fellow citizens or those closest to them. Even the main character of the novel, who

dedicated his life to understanding "THEIR" malicious plans, reveals himself to be a mean, paranoid person who demeans all and everyone, and to have probably committed a mortal crime (constitutes one of the novel's plots, this "crime" ultimately remains as mysterious as it was in the beginning).

Given these qualities, it is no wonder that neither (post-)Soviet Lithuanian society nor Lithuanian literature was able to stand up to the challenges of Ricardas Gavelis when faced with this open, uncompromising and shocking prose. Twenty years after it appeared in the Lithuanian original, *Vilniaus pokeris* has finally been translated into English and published in the US in 2009. Even though delayed, the publication of the English translation should lead to other translations of the writings of this interesting, provocative and deeply conscious writer. Meanwhile, the intention of Gavelis' publishers to reprint all ten of his novels and collections of short stories will provide a new opportunity to younger generations to read his fiction in a different literary, cultural and social context.

### **Black humour and social criticism**

In the last decade, Lithuanian literature lost Ricardas Gavelis, Jurgis Kuncinas and Jurga Ivanauskaitė, three important though controversial writers of the middle generation. The gap between the generation of writers who built their reputation in the Soviet era, and the younger generation who matured in the post-Soviet period (alas, smaller in number) is especially evident. Few would disagree, however, that it is those writers who are now in their late forties or early fifties that have developed the strongest voice. Belonging to this generation is Herkus Kuncius, who publishes a new novel or short story collection almost every year. *Pijoko chrestomatija* (Anthology of a drunkard, 2009) is a witty, subtle, sometimes sarcastic novel; the rupturing episodes of its postmodern plot are held together by its characters' lust for alcohol. The protagonist, a young post-Soviet conceptual artist, travels through Europe, spending his time in artistic communities whose members share his interest in heavy drinking. Combining the main plot with anecdotal stories of the Soviet and pre-Soviet era, the author reconsiders the peculiarities of drinking culture during the communist regime, comparing it with the habits of contemporary artists in the East and West. The parallels reveal absurdities: back then, people drank out of hopelessness, lack of meaning, or simply as a social habit under communism; today's artistic bohemians drink to drown a new spiritual emptiness, a lack of a meaning in their artistic activities. Though the author occasionally hints at being a moralist, as a literary text *Pijoko chrestomatija* contains no morals. It is just a socially insightful text full of black humour — a striking and witty parody of the existential emptiness of contemporary society reduced to the tiny dimensions of an international artistic community.

In a recent collection of short stories, *Isduoti, issizadeti, apsmeizti* (To betray, to renounce, to defame, 2007), Kuncius creates a narrative in which the older generation can recognize their life during the Soviet period. Nevertheless, he retells this life in the form of stories about sexual abuse. Sometimes, they strike a prophetic note. In a narrative about Artek, a camp for young pioneers in the Crimea, a grandmother tells her half-asleep granddaughter about the "good old days". During her stay in Artek she was obviously sexually exploited by an adult — just as in a recent scandal that struck both Lithuanian and Ukraine societies, when the headmaster of this once famous camp for children was accused of sexual abusing teenagers.

Herkus Kuncius can be considered one of the foremost conceptual critics of the Soviet period in contemporary Lithuanian fiction. He consciously deconstructs the history of dependence in order to show the impact of its systemic mentality on post-Soviet reality. It is impossible to get rid of history, it is only possible to experience and reconsider it, implies the author. Revisiting and reconsidering are especially important to those who never had direct experience of that absurd system. This concept is realised with the help of absurd, grotesque irony, and sometimes postmodern pastiche. One of the most important texts in this respect is his novel *Nepasigailėti Dusanskio* (No mercy for Dusanskis, 2006), in which the author employs a biblical structure to a story about the teachings of a "contemporary Christ" — a communist functionary. Kuncius follows his career from a post-war executioner of anti-Soviet partisans to the highest ranks of the party and, finally, his removal to the margins of social life. The novel is a persistent, insightful and critical revision of Lithuania's communist past.

Sigitas Parulskis can also be ranked as a social critic. Establishing his reputation as one of the leading poets of his generation immediately after the re-establishment of Lithuania's independence, he later shifted his focus to novels, short stories, essays, and plays. His prose debut came with the book *Trys sekundes dangaus* (Three seconds of sky, 2002), based on the experience serving as a paratrooper in the Soviet Army. Following the American critic Ronald Sukenick, one could call this a "docutext" rather than a piece of pure fiction. Despite certain flaws in form and the excessive use of army slang, this narrative drew a lot of attention to the author and made him a cult figure.

Parulskis' most recent novel, *Murmanti siena* (The mumbling wall, 2009), is a sort of epos of Lithuania's twentieth century seen through the village Olandija. A former political prisoner and deportee is found in a pit of filthy water — the author's challenge to new national tendencies to glorify, conjecturally, all former fighter against the Soviet regime and those persecuted by it. The tiny village turns into a metaphor of Lithuania's twentieth-century history: WWI and II, the Holocaust, post-war partisan warfare, the Gulag, and the gloomy Soviet decades. Parulskis manages to avoid being nostalgic, sentimental or narcissistic about the resistance during a half-century of foreign oppression. However, the narrative itself, unlike the novels by Kuncius, is modernist rather than postmodern, bringing to mind western family-sagas of the first half of the last century. It is striking how, in his latest novel, this literary rebel employs traditional forms of narrative that might be associated with a general exhaustion of postmodernism.

Several of Parulskis' recent works border between essay and short story. *Nuogi drabužiai* (Naked clothes, 2002), *Miegas ir kitos moterys* (Sleep and other women, 2005), *Šiaurinė kronika* (Northern report, 2008) are all collections of essays that reflect a violent, somewhat cynical attitude to reality. And yet, these books undoubtedly demonstrate that he is among the most interesting and original essayists in present-day Lithuania.

The essay genre is successfully cultivated by another writer of Parulskis' generation, coincidentally a poet but also a translator from German: Kestutis Navakas. His collection of essays *Gero gyvenimo kronikos* (2005) was followed in 2008 by *Du lagaminai sniego* (Two bags full of snow), which somewhat oddly won him the National Prize (Parulskis was awarded this most prestigious five years previously). Navakas' essays are thematically varied: he writes about his childhood and teenage years (his first pair of jeans and LPs), trips abroad, things he once possessed, even food (his taste for seafood for

example), or the province as a state of mind.

It should be noted, though, that the claim of some Lithuanian literary critics and philosophers that the essay is a leading literary genre in today's Lithuania is much too premature. Despite the fact that there is an abundance of books classified as essay collections, most are either journalistic commentaries on social life or short stories deviating somewhat from the classical form. Among many such publications, a small collection of texts, *Estafete* (Relay, 2009) by the poet Gintaras Bleizgys, deserves at least passing mention.

### The rural and the urban

Except for Laura Sintija Cerniauskaite, who won the 2009 European Union Prize for Literature (it remains to be seen whether the award will acquire any significant symbolic value), and the less interesting but no less popular Renata Serelyte, there are very few women that can equal the leading male writers in Lithuania. Cerniauskaite and Serelyte depict similar themes: the lives of young people who are born in the countryside and move to the city and become embedded in a new, urban culture. Cerniauskaite made her debut, while still in secondary school, with a collection of short stories, *Trys paros prie mylimosios slenkscio* (Three days and nights on the threshold of the beloved, 1994). She gained her reputation with her second book, a volume containing several novellas and a play: *Liucce ciuozia* (Lucy goes skating, 2004). Her most recent book, the novel *Benedikto slenksciai* (Thresholds of Benediktas, 2009), set forth these familiar themes. In a realistic manner, she tells the story of a young, gifted teenager who studies at a provincial art school, his relations with an ageing and seriously ill father, and his sexual and spiritual "initiation" into the world of adults. As in many other contemporary Lithuanian novels, Cerniauskaite deals with a transitional period: the contours of the present are rather dim, and while developing a sensitive and subtle narrative, she does not aim to create a universal metaphor for life at a time of social change. It is an open, honest and sometimes painful narrative about the life of a young person in a society that has lost their way between material and spiritual values, and where the ethos of consumerism is becoming more and more profound.

It is hardly surprising that the rural dimension plays such a dominant role in the newest Lithuanian fiction, since the majority of the authors that have made their debuts in recent decades were born and raised in the countryside, in a semi-rural, semi-urbanized culture, affected by forced collectivization and other Soviet reforms. Urban Lithuanian fiction lacks older and stronger roots, and only a handful of writers have dealt in any significant way with the influence of contemporary urban realities on the lives of men and women. And yet, the urban code is becoming more pronounced in the articulation of writers of the younger and youngest generations. Beyond the fact that there is a generational shift taking place in Lithuanian fiction, it is also clear that new existential problems pertinent to urban life are becoming more and more important. The city is not only a background for a story, it is also a spiritual state of the contemporary individual.

Recently, while I was lecturing on post-Soviet fiction at the international summer school of the University of Vilnius, someone ironically remarked that there seems to be many Lithuanian writers writing about the past. This is true. However, literature is not only an instrument that is sensitive to the feelings of individuals and the society in which they live. Literature has many goals. A desperate attempt to react to everything that is going on at the present moment threatens to turn it into mere journalistic commentary. Literature that is being

produced here and now, in itself, is a response to metaphysical and social problems posed by contemporary ways of life. So the fact that Lithuanian writers are concerned with the past should not surprise anyone. Literature is among other things a way to reflect on our own past, and it is only natural that every generation of writers try to find answers to eternal questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Only when we have answered these questions, can we try to speculate on where we are going.

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