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**The Myth of the Artist – from Birth to Collapse:
Notes on the Lithuanian Present-Day Novel**

Abstract

The article based on the comparative principle seeks to introduce to a wide audience two novels by Lithuanian writers Kęstutis Navakas (*Vyno kopija* [“The Wine Copy”], 2016) and Marius Ivaškevičius (*Tomas Mūras*, 2022), whose authors wish to reflect on the status of the artist in the current era of excess and prosperity. The myth of the artist began taking shape in the 19th century and remained at its height throughout the 20th century, even though art itself underwent many changes. Is the artist still the representative of the elite in society in a post-modern age, when the line between art and pop, between personality and promotional image is almost blurred? These are the questions the authors ask and try to answer, joining inevitably those European authors who placed the creative person at the centre of their fictional world over the last two centuries. Anyone who writes on this subject almost inevitably becomes an author of World literature, as we have understood it since Goethe. The study seeks to reveal the diversity of literary associations, sometimes unconsciously touched upon by the authors, and the tradition of the European novel in dealing with questions of art, man, and his meaning on Earth.

Keywords: modern Lithuanian novel; intertextuality; myth of the artist

Résumé

**Le mythe de l'artiste – de la naissance à l'effondrement :
notes sur le roman lituanien actuel**

L'article basé sur le principe comparatif vise à présenter à un large public deux romans des écrivains lituaniens Kęstutis Navakas (*Vyno kopija* [„La copie du vin“], 2016) et Marius Ivaškevičius (*Tomas Mūras*, 2022) dans lesquels les auteurs cherchent à réfléchir sur le statut de l'artiste dans l'ère actuelle de démesure et de prospérité. Le mythe de l'artiste a commencé à prendre forme au 19^e siècle et est resté à son apogée tout au long du 20^e siècle, alors que l'art lui-même a connu de nombreux changements. L'artiste est-il encore le représentant de l'élite de la société à une époque post-moderne, où la frontière entre l'art et le pop, entre la personnalité et l'image promotionnelle, est presque floue ? Telles sont les questions que les auteurs se posent et auxquelles ils tentent de répondre, rejoignant inévitablement les auteurs européens qui ont placé la personne créative au centre de leur univers fictionnel au cours des deux derniers siècles. Quiconque écrit sur ce sujet devient presque inévitablement un auteur de la littérature mondiale telle que nous l'entendons depuis Goethe. L'étude cherche à révéler la diversité des associations littéraires, parfois inconsciemment évoquées par les auteurs, et la tradition du roman européen dans le traitement des questions de l'art, de l'homme et de sa signification sur terre.

Mots-clés : roman lituanien moderne ; intertextualité ; mythe de l'artiste

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Introduction

“Using this term Weltliteratur is inseparable from a practice of translation [...]” – states Jérôme David, discussing the origins of the term². For small nations such as the Lithuanians, translations were indeed a window to the world, and it has been repeatedly stated that translations influence the literary process more than immanent development³. Translations always show the main themes of humanity. In the early stages of academic development, the authenticity of authorship was not necessary – translators retold foreign-language works under their name or a pseudonym. The plot, often didactic, was more important than the author. As its importance began to increase, the position of the artist became one of the attractive topics, enabling literature to be looked at from a comparativist perspective. Translations have remained important, influencing society and the arts, a mode of communication and exchange.

Kęstutis Navakas and his “The Wine Copy”

Kęstutis Navakas (1964-2020) managed to turn himself into a legend of Lithuanian literature, the kind that he idolized Byron, Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and others in world literature. After the publication of his first collection of poetry, he set about painstakingly creating his myth – that of a man without prejudices, a self-confident, charming man who drives women crazy – in short, an elite artist who feeds on and creates elite culture⁴. To a greater or lesser extent, all artists aspire to this, but far from all of them take the plunge, not all succeed. Navakas was able to do so not only with his poetry but also with his theatrical, bohemian posture and with the demonstration of his lifestyle on social networks. Translations have remained important, influencing society and the arts, a mode of communication and exchange. His poetry, declaring the principle of “art for art’s sake”, has been growing in strength, gathering a circle of admirers. He liked to sell his books from his nearly abandoned wooden house, hand-delivered or sent by post, with a little something in addition to his signature. From 1996-2005, Navakas was the founder and co-owner of the bookshop club “Septynios vienatvės” (“Seven Solitudes”) in the Old Town of Kaunas, where he presented newly published books.

² Jérôme David. *The Four Genealogies of “World Literature”*, in: *Approaches to World Literature*. Published by Akademie Verlag, 2013, p. 14.

³ The real test for translators in every nation is Proust, Kafka, or Joyce. Such translations transform the local culture to a certain extent. Their impact is powerful in politically constrained societies like the former Soviet one.

⁴ Navakas published ten poetry books, five collections of essays, several books for children, and two novels. His poetry and prose have been translated into Russian, Latvian, Kartvelian, Finnish, Swedish, Macedonian, German, and English.

He was an avid collector of vinyl records, was interested in Japanese war art, and had an extensive library at home where he worked and lived as an ivory tower. As long as his health allowed, he was known for his bohemian life, spending a lot of time drinking in bars and restaurants, and in the last years of his life, he drank only at home, never going out, but never stopping writing, translating and corresponding⁵. His arrogance made him difficult to live with, and he managed to get married and divorced three times. Finally, knowing that he was suffering from a fatal disease (muscle atrophy), and that the only condition for recovery was to stop drinking alcohol, he deliberately did not do so to make his death part of the myth he had created and nurtured.

“The Wine Copy” is Navakas’s best novel, which has the mark of autobiography. “To describe the novel’s narrator in the words of the book: “Fallen people are beautiful to me.” Wandering – at the same time now and in memory – through the city avenue, non-representative cafes, the Musical Theater, extraterrestrial spaces, and the observer of the space of the room proves that intoxicating and drunkenness can turn life into an intoxicating fact”, wrote one of the critics⁶.

The plot of the novel is loose – like Cortázar’s “Playing Classes”, it can be read from anywhere, or, one could say, there is no plot at all; the whole “palace over the abyss” is held together only by a picaresque character named K. (here the allusions run the gamut from Franz Kafka to the name of Kęstutis himself). Essentially, textual reality dominates, and the wine copy here means copies, fragments, hints, and references of various authors and films; it is an imaginal reality where the character can simultaneously operate in different dimensions of time and space, observe himself dead, and so on.

“Fragments” of the plot are recreated each time the protagonist, himself being a “living text”, descends from Green Hill⁷ into the city center. At its heart are imaginative events, the narrator’s observant eye that sees things from an unexpected angle, wit, and the knowledge of Derrida’s idea that nothing exists outside the text and that the primary goal of valuable literature is to create the Barthesian pleasure of the text. Reading this prose text, you can feel that it was written by a real poet because every sentence reaches the “level” of poetry, and life in the novel is perceived as a game in the sense of Gadamer; only we can remember that children, footballers, chess players, are playing very seriously. Thus, Navakas’ game is not frivolous; it often requires a lot of mental and intellectual effort on the part of the author and the reader because there is a lot of hidden language, apt epithets, metaphors, and unexpected juxtapositions, aphorisms of semantic density and unconventional allusions. The author manages to turn each episode into a small spectacle, where the protagonists can be characters from

⁵ He has translated many poetry from German and English.

⁶ Giedra Radvilavičiūtė. *Vyno kopija* “ – *svaiginantis meno faktas*. www.delfi.lt. 9 August 2016.

⁷ Žaliakalnis (Green hill) is a district of Kaunas city with a hill surrounding the Old Town.

other literary works, actors from films, or singers from rock bands, who episodically intervene in the “action” and then go out of focus, giving way to new mans “with qualities”.

From the perspective of past time, this whole circus, or spectacle, created and “living” in “The Wine Copy” is like the Book Man’s farewell to the world of literature, music, art, and cinema and to his city, where he lived and which icon became.

Marius Ivaškevičius: Author’s Focus

Marius Ivaškevičius (born. in 1973) is better known (especially for European audiences) as a playwright. “Tomas Mūras” is only the second Ivaškevičius novel. His international fame came from his dramas. Some of the plays were wildly successful (“The Russian Novel” won three awards at once at the Russian National Theatre Award “Golden Mask”, becoming the “Best Play of the Season 2015/2016”)⁸. Plots for plays the author chooses from the lives of prominent personalities. The details of their biographies and the most important ideas are reinterpreted in their way and thus brought to life in Ivaškevičius’ work. Among the past authorities who were included in the workshop are the traveler and dreamer Kazys Pakštas and poet Salomėja Nėris (“Madagascar”, 2004); Adam Mickiewicz (“The Master”, 2010), Leo Tolstoy (“The Russian Novel”, 2016), philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804; “Kant”, 2013).

Ivaškevičius looks at the authorities of the past with good-natured humor, highlighting the stereotypes that afflict them, while preserving respect, revealing the originality of those personalities and their ideas in the context of the present. As a rule, the bio of real artists and “lives” of the fictional characters are intertwined, mirroring each other, thus revealing an immediate connection between life and creation that we usually do not notice. Ivaškevičius is characterized by creative courage, with which he undertakes to reinterpret apparently already-established authorities. For the authenticity of that time, Ivaškevičius uses the colloquial language of that era, concepts, terms, and sentence constructions. All this gives the play a comic tone, so the audience watches the action with a forgiving smile and the joy of discovery.

Write a Novel!

By involving the artist in the plot, Ivaškevičius reveals the invisible creative impulses and the so-called suffering of the artist’s work.

⁸ Almost every one of his works has been awarded some kind of prize. In 2014, the author received the Order of Merit for Lithuania; in 2018, he received the Lithuanian National Culture and Art Prize, the highest artistic award.

Interestingly, in “Tomas Mūras”, he challenges himself by becoming a character and as if asking himself: “Will I, who have studied many biographies, be able to write a novel based on my postulates?”.

There are at least three hypotheses for the novel as a genre. First of them is to write convincingly, i.e., write about what you know best; in this case, you know yourself, it is the self-reflection (inevitably, there is an autobiographical quality, but that’s not a minus); b) to speak, think, see, articulate in a distinctive way, to create a style and a hidden, as the author mentions, prose rhythm that “carries” the whole story; (c) another condition, in addition to an interesting plot, which is a prerequisite for a novel, is the “love story”; although this component is included in the genre’s title, it is often forgotten, or pretended to have been forgotten, by contemporary authors, because it is not an easy prerequisite to meet, and a good “love story” in a novel overcomes everything. M. Ivaškevičius is aware of these hypotheses and adheres to them as much as possible. The author looks honestly into the darkness of human existence to understand the relationship between the talent given by nature and the meaning of life, feeling the uplifting and destroying power of love.

Romanticism spread the conflict between the artist, the subtle, unique, restless subject, and the philistine, the mundane, limited, unhurried, domestic self-love. This conflict is playfully realized as a central idea in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s novel “The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr” (1820)⁹. Two centuries later, Hoffmann’s plot is still making its way through literature: in Ivaškevičius we can find a cat who takes up residence with the protagonist, Tomas Mūras, in his “cage”; there is, as in Hoffmann’s novel, a “Preface to the Dear Reader”, where the supposed publisher of the book claims to be publishing a handwritten manuscript, which is hardly readable at the end, and where he finds among its pages the author’s traces of domesticity and some factual evidence...

Tomas Mūras, the artist’s pseudonym, is deliberately similar to Tom Moore, the author of “Utopia” because Mūras lives in an artist’s residence – a kind of Utopia Island: he has all the conditions to be happy, to create, to write, to love life in the same way as Hoffmann’s Cat did.

Only Tomas Mūras is both an artist, sensitively recording the movements of his soul, and a materialist in one person, freely enjoying the privileges of caste, exclusive attention, and respect, a self-satisfied male who smokes and sips whisky all the time, who plays the part of a creator, and who brazenly parasitizes at the expense of others; he is a human being, and he is also an animal, who revels in life, and who is also on the way to death. Centuries have passed since the geniuses of art were poor, starving, and buried in common graves. Now they are gods, living in gods’ Olympuses – artists’

⁹ As we know, the title of Hoffmann’s novel is reminiscent of the ironic novel “The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman” (1759-1767) by the British writer Laurence Sterne; Laurence Sterne’s title of the novel, in turn, was inspired by “Don Quixote”.

residences. Artists are invited to take up residence there: there, they will be provided with everything, and all they have to do is to create to increase the spiritual treasures of humanity. Humanity seems to be redeeming its mistake: the long-unrealized dream of artists is now coming true in the 21st century. Both Marius Ivaškevičius and Undine Radzevičiūtė, two Lithuanian representatives, lived almost simultaneously in the artists' residence in Bamberg, the ancient German town where Hoffmann once wandered, struggling to make ends meet; there is now a monument to him, a figure of the writer with a bundle of manuscripts under his armpit and a cat on his shoulder.

On the other hand, Ivaškevičius (or rather, his protagonist) is caught in the conditions of Western moral degeneration, as a consistent Marxist would say, which destroys rather than encourages the creative person – it is not for nothing that individual apartments in a villa are called cages. It is as if a philistine crowd comes to see the artists during the zoo's animal visiting hours. They know the exhibits' names, follow the residency news, the relations between the artists' community, and the results of the communication, sometimes aggressive.

Mūras, who has long felt like the chief male of the herd, who is aloof and spits on all the remarks of his patrons because of the name and rating he has built up, also knows that scandals increase, not decrease, the popularity of residences. In the novel, this experienced wolf unexpectedly meets a rival, another male eager to become the head of the pack, Vasia, a composer rapidly gaining popularity in the world. One of the climaxes of the plot is a physical duel between the males at the residence.

Mūras's decision to obey the voice of his talent and to choose a life in the residences was a cornerstone, an alternative to the existence of an "ordinary" philistine who loved his woman and child. But now, having isolated himself from his family and ordinary life for so long, he begins to question the meaning of this path. He desperately tries to atone for his guilt, to save what he has lost – his son and the woman in his life¹⁰.

Mūras's letter to his son on his eighteenth birthday is one of the novel's most striking pages. It is poetry in prose, a scene that could become a literary classic, as Anna Karenina's date with her deprived son has become.

The letter is at the beginning of the novel. The novel's saver is crowned by the vision of the lake of love – an imaginary encounter with eternal nature, the people he has loved all his life, the immortal beloved, the embodiment of *Ewig Weibliche*, the content of the painful longing that increasingly overwhelms Tomas Mūras, determining his changing manners in the artists' residence and, ultimately, his fate. To get closer to his beloved, Mūras needs to stop being a writer – he needs to become a character, a man who has lost his way. To turn his life into a work of art, he invents a

¹⁰ Ivaškevičius has a daughter who lives in New York; their relationship, as the writer says, is excellent.

superhuman mission in the jungles of Borneo, where Anna is: “I would spend the rest of my time guarding that forest. I think it’s a fantastic feeling when you’re a one-day-old butterfly defending such an eternal thing”¹¹.

With the joy of discovery, Mūras not only abandons the comfortable path of the artist but also decides to go further – to stop being a man. The fundamentally incompatible layers of nature and culture, which lie deep within man, are touched upon. The movement from man to beast forms the novel’s drift, one of its aspects. The path to the final goal is motivated in several ways. Hoffmann’s Cat moves as if in reverse – from beast to man, learning the language and writing of men, becoming a writer, and immortalizing his biography and views in a memoir. But the Cat remains convinced that animals are more perfect than humans because they do not need words. They convey ideas in body language – adequate, precise, superior to human language, polluted, stale, and has lost its adequacy, which has to be found in various forms of expression. Mūras comes to exactly the same conclusion and prepares to live among the orangutans, exercising, chewing on barks, and using a construction rope to jump to the second floor of his residence during his training.

Anna is not the mother of his son. But she is the one sent by God, the woman of life, the lover given by fate, the one who drives him crazy. “I cannot imagine us apart. Separate and happy,” she wrote in a text message. Mutual messages are saved on an old phone, which the hero takes out like a forbidden fruit and starts fiddling with them, rekindling the feeling of love for Anna. Waves of longing that begin to gnaw and tear Mūras¹². The realization that the silhouette of this woman has been sought all the time since the break-up, that happiness with her was absolute, and that it is desperate to find her, no matter how old she is, no matter how she looks, overwhelms the protagonist in the same way as it did in Iris Murdoch’s famous novel “The sea, the sea...”

The novel’s finale is a strong point. Abstaining from the girls in the residence who are constantly offering themselves for bed, choosing celibacy initially, as it seems to him, out of loyalty to Anna, but eventually abandoning even Anna (“I saw the extent of my delusion – how I had tried to pull her love out of the old wreckage of our lives, though it is clear to a madman that it is all over”¹³), silencing the demons of talent that try to discourage him, Mūras achieves absolute freedom, free from the world, in the last scene urging himself to make the final leap: “Into the water, who is told! Throw that logbook – the ship is already listing on its side”¹⁴.

¹¹ Marius Ivaškevičius, „Tomas Mūras“, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2022, 289 [translation E. Ž.]. Anna’s image was inspired by a real person, Birutė Galdikas (born 1946) – a Canadian Lithuanian anthropologist, primatologist, conservationist, ethnologist, and writer.

¹² The meaning of “Mūras” in Lithuanian is “Brickwork wall”.

¹³ *Tomas Mūras*, p. 297.

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 302.

In the tradition of Lithuanian literature, Ivaškevičius's novel is closest to Antanas Škėma's "White Shroud" (1958)¹⁵. Both novels deal with exhaustion, fatigue, aging, the loss of love, the "shattered" mind, and the liberation from the cage of consciousness. Antanas Garšva (antagonist of "White Shroud") enrolls himself in the line of great names: "Alexander the Great, Caesar, Napoleon, Michelangelo, Pascal, Pope, Poe, O. Henry, Walt Whitman, Moliere and Stevenson were all neurasthenics"¹⁶); Tomas Mūras names his favorite authors as "drunkards" ("half, if not two-thirds, of all literary masterpieces are created by alcohol"), who have felt that the gift of nature given to them – the talent of writing – has exhausted itself, and who have deliberately fallen silent: "And many have thus fallen silent (Tolstoy, Byron, Mickiewicz, Selinger), having reached the top gear beyond which language no longer moves"¹⁷.

Conclusion

Both authors play with literature and its norms in a postmodern way, deliberately violating them but retaining the structure and artistic integrity of the works, not, in fact, denying but continuing the tradition of Romantic art and the artist, a kind of rebel, and his cult. Navak creates the image of a man who moves into the virtual world of text, offering a bohemian enjoyment of art and the infinite possibilities of intertextuality. Ivaškevičius's protagonist, on the other hand, breaks out of the orbit of literature and the artist, assuming for himself, like the prototypes of his dramas (the prototypes of real persons), the mission of a prophet and a visionary, a mission that man is essentially incapable of fulfilling. The aesthetics of art created by Romanticism thus appear receptive and inexhaustible, still providing strong creative impulses. However, a nostalgic detachment from this program can be seen in both novels.

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¹⁵ Antanas Škėma's novel "White Shroud" is considered to be the best novel written in the Lithuanian diaspora in the USA.

¹⁶ Skema, Antanas. *White Shroud*. Glasgow: Vagabond Voices, 2018, p. 6.

¹⁷Op. cit., p. 293.