

<https://doi.org/10.60056/CCL.2025.11.166-173>

Eugenijus ŽMUIDA¹

Interpretations of the Prometheus Myth in Lithuanian Pre-Soviet, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Literature

Abstract

The article uses comparative and history of ideas methods to review and summarise the inclusion of the universal Prometheus myth in Lithuanian literature. The relevance of this myth began to emerge in the social context of the late 19th century, when the Lithuanian nation was embracing the ideology of nationalism, was searching for its place in political history, and had begun a smooth process of cultural development. The myth, image, and symbol of Prometheus, with new meanings being given to it, has been relevant to Lithuanian authors throughout the entire period of one and a half hundred years in question: from 1883 (when the first periodical *Auszra* appeared) till 2023. The article presents the most important authors of each period and their works dealing with Promethean themes, as well as the general cultural, literary, and ideological context that conditioned the choice and goals of each author.

Keywords: myth of Prometheus; Lithuanian literature; Pre-War, Inter-War, Soviet, and Post-Soviet periods; intertextuality

Résumé

Transformations du mythe de Prométhée dans la littérature lituanienne pré-soviétique, soviétique et post-soviétique

L'article examine et résume l'intégration du mythe universel de Prométhée dans la littérature lituanienne en utilisant des méthodes comparatives et d'histoire des idées. La pertinence de ce mythe a commencé à émerger dans le contexte social de la fin du XIX^e siècle, lorsque la nation lituanienne embrassait l'idéologie du nationalisme, cherchait sa place dans l'histoire politique et avait entamé un processus de développement culturel en douceur. Le mythe, l'image et le symbole de Prométhée, auxquels de nouvelles significations ont été données, ont été pertinents pour les auteurs lituaniens tout au long de la période d'un siècle et demi en question : de 1883 (lorsque le premier périodique « Auszra » a été publié) à 2024. L'article présente les auteurs les plus importants de chaque période et leurs œuvres traitant du thème prométhéen, ainsi que le contexte culturel, littéraire et idéologique général qui a conditionné le choix et les objectifs de chaque auteur.

Mots-clés : mythe de Prométhée ; littérature lituanienne ; périodes d'avant-guerre, d'entre-deux-guerres, soviétique et post-soviétique ; intertextualité

Introduction

Hans Georg Gadamer argues that the myth of Prometheus is the main myth of Western destiny².

This means that the theme of Prometheanism is present in every literature that grew out of Antiquity.

¹ Eugenijus ŽMUIDA, PhD, is a researcher at The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. His scholarly interests focus on 19th–20th century literature (Lithuanian, Russian, European), 19th–20th century philosophy, mythology and folklore, comparative studies, war literature, and memory. He has published a monograph on philosophical aspects of poetry by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas (1893–1967), edited ten books, and published dozens of articles in Lithuanian, Russian and English, and writes regularly reviews of recently published Lithuanian prose.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2387-788X>

² Prometheus und die Tragödie der Kultur [1946], In: H.-G. Gadamer, *GW IX: Ästhetik und Poetik II*, Tübingen, 1991, S. 151–160.

The concept of the Promethean rebellion, resistance, and individual creativity became relevant immediately in Lithuanian literature despite the difficult times surrounding national culture in the Russian Empire. The political awakening of the Lithuanian nation is associated with the launch of the Lithuanian-language periodical *Ausra* (*Sunrise*, 1883-1886) by Jonas Basanavičius, a doctor working in Bulgaria who closely observed the events of the Spring of Nations in Europe.

Alongside the social and societal problems that characterized Europe at the time, dreams of justice and shared happiness for humanity emerged. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, they became intertwined with modern ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, democratism, and the revolutionary sentiments that were prominent in Poland, the Baltic States, and Russia itself at the time. The Promethean worldview brought together collective activism and romantic and modernist individualism, and new technological advances later.

Pre-War (The WWI) period

In pre-war Lithuanian literature, the theme of Prometheans' is prominent in the works of two authors – Jonas Biliūnas (1874-1907) and Jurgis Baltrušaitis (1877-1944). Since the tsarist authorities closed Vilnius University as early as 1832 (after the political uprising of 1831) and in 1864 banned the press and education in Lithuanian, there were only two options for pursuing an education: to choose the path of a priest (to study in the Catholic seminary in Kaunas) or to look for a university outside Lithuania.

Biliūnas' parents pressured him to enter the seminary, but he did not feel called to such a sacrifice, so he graduated from the Liepaja Gymnasium and enrolled at the University of Tartu, even though he did have lost his parents' material support³. During the period of Lithuanian cultural revival (1883-1904), Lithuanian literature was strongly influenced by Polish Romantic authors, such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and others, whose works were not alien to the mood of the Promethean rebellion. Biliūnas, living in industrial cities, understood the proletarian class, exploitation, social inequality, and misery. He became absorbed in revolutionary and socialist ideas and joined the Social Democratic Party. The emblem of Prometheanism is evident in the early short story *Through a Dream*

³ The choice between a career as a priest (for peasants, this seemed to be the highest career achievement, and it was a dream to have at least one son in the priesthood) and a secular profession was a huge dilemma and a problem for many talented young people of that time. The priesthood guaranteed material well-being and even the possibility to support parents and relatives, but it eliminated a personal life. Lithuanians (Catholics) who had acquired a secular profession were forbidden to work in Lithuania (exception was made only for doctors). The list of Lithuanian writers from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries consisted entirely of priests and doctors.

(1901), where a symbolic vision is presented as a dream: a mighty giant appears, encouraging people to believe in themselves. The story expresses, according to a Lithuanian critic, “the belief in the absolute superiority of the power of the personality over metaphysical or secular power”⁴.

However, soon after he left for Europe in 1904 (Leipzig, later Zurich) to continue his studies, he gave up active political activity, resigned from the party, and his worldview underwent a new transformation. He devoted himself to studying literature, philosophy, psychology, and ethnology and gradually abandoned positivism in favor of a philosophical treatment of man and society, a Christian humanism, an ethic of self-sacrifice and redemption. His thinking became closer to the structure of myth, fairy tale, allegory, and the possibility of enchantment and miraculous deliverance from the Dark Ages. The new philosophical attitude is clearly seen in the short story *The Glimmer of Happiness* (1905). The action is centered around a mountain, the axis mundi, that structures the traditional mythological cosmos. The tension between the top and the bottom becomes a challenge for the people who, at the top of the mountain, read the golden letters and realize that they see the lantern of happiness. Hundreds and thousands of young people climb the hill to bring happiness to humanity, but when they look back for support, they instantly turn into stones. This Promethean and utopian quest for humanity's spiritual and moral purification is inevitably a path of sacrifice and suffering. The cost of this path is emphasized once again in Biliūnas' last work, *The Sad Tale* (1907), where a wandering lonely old woman is still searching for her husband, who was killed in the rebellion (for the happiness of all)⁵ in his youth, and her blind eyes are shining like the stars, though they are now dead.

The second writer to develop the Prometheus theme, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, after graduating from the gymnasium in Kaunas, went to Moscow to study, where he soon became close to the young Symbolist artists, became involved in their activities, and began to write in Russian. His poems were close to the idealistic philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov, offering an alternative to Nietzsche's concept of the superhuman. Solovyov's view influenced the whole of Russian Symbolism. So, Baltrušaitis sees Prometheus as Creator, and the process of creation “as a holy, religious deed, the liberation of the spirit from the material world and development; the poet is recognized as a mediator between divinity and humanity, as a prophet”⁶, as one who is called to continue the work of the Creator:

Божий мир еще не создан,
Недостроен божий храм,
Только серый камень роздан, —

⁴ Kvietauskas, Mindaugas. Prometėjiškoji pasaulėvoka Jono Biliūno prozoje. In: *Metai*, 2005, nr. 12, p. 85.

⁵ The political liberation uprising in the former common state (of Poland and Lithuania) in 1863-64.

⁶ Keturakis, Ugnius. *Prometheism in creative work of Jurgis Baltrušaitis and Giovanni Papini: summary of doctoral dissertation*. Kaunas, Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto leidykla, 2010, p. 22.

Только мощь дана рукам. (*Ave, crux!*)⁷

The steps to heaven symbolize the creation process – as steps (or levels) to divine wisdom. Valerij Briusov, in his comprehensive review of Baltrušaitis' poetry, notes that Baltrušaitis has discovered himself immediately and never betrayed himself. Briusov notes the Lithuanian poet's tendency to symbolize and exaggerate everything, to see the world in general, but to see neither a specific person nor a specific phenomenon. These qualities, he says, give the poems their seriousness but sometimes lead to pompous rhetoric⁸. Baltrušaitis created a coherent system of views and speech – a distinctive theurgic myth, the individual episodes prominent in each poem, from which we can reconstruct the myth. The most important components here are the earth and the cosmos, God and man, the miracle of existence, and man's moral duty – to God and to this miracle. Thus, Baltrušaitis' poems, painting similar situations and repeating almost identical actions of the protagonist, create the impression of ritualistic ceremonies.

Inter-War period

In the inter-war period, Lithuania finally won its independence (declared in 1918) and created the first Lithuanian national state. For this, it had to fight so-called 'little wars' (Winston Churchill's term) in 1918-1920 against the Russian Bolsheviks, the German Bermontists⁹, and the Poles of Józef Pilsudski, who sought to restore the former *Żečpospolita*. Independence was a great impulse for Lithuanian culture – almost all arts flourished, developed rapidly, and followed the modernist currents of Europe. The universal archetype of Prometheanism gained a new interpretation. Here, I would like to single out the Catholic philosopher and poet Antanas Maceina (poetic pseudonym Jasmantas, 1908-1987), who reflected on the problem of Prometheus from a philosophical point of view, first publishing the article *The Promethean Tragedy of Culture* (1932), and later the study *The Problem of Prometheus* (1938). Lithuanian philosophers emphasized three ideas of European culture on which life is oriented: the Promethean, the Christian, and the bourgeois.

Maceina describes Prometheus as a symbol of the creation of culture, rejecting religion. "The fate of Prometheus in Greek mythical thought is seen as a symbol of the fate of every culture that wants

⁷ "God's world is not yet created, / God's temple is not yet finished, – / Only the gray stone is handed out, / Only the power is given to the hands", (eng. transl. mine). In: Baltrušaitis, Jurgis. *Dulkės ir žvaigždės: poezija*. Vilnius, Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2013, p. 350.

⁸ Брюсов, Валерий. *Собрание сочинений*, т. 6, Москва, Художественная литература, 1975, с. 343.

⁹ A military unit of the White Army, supported by Germany and commanded by Bermont-Alov.

to achieve complete happiness by its means, disregarding religion”¹⁰. But guilt haunts the creative man and gives rise to the Christian religion. Maceina formulates a program of theistic humanism, the main goal of which is a synthesis of faith and culture. The third aspect concerns the utilitarianizing of culture: culture becomes the basis of the purpose of life and is created for its own sake. The third (bourgeois) aspect follows from the second, since culture, by becoming the primary purpose of man, turns man himself into a tool. In the same work (1938), he stresses the demonic aspect of the Promethean revolt and finds its manifestations in nationalism and communism. Here again, the possibility of a new element of Prometheanism emerges when it is conceived as resistance to utilitarianism and the bourgeoisie.

Maceina continued his scientific research in exile after WWII, and his conception of Prometheanism moved closer to existential philosophy. “Cultural Tragicism is no longer described as not so much as a symbol of a Promethean revolt against the gods, but rather that this tragicism is found in the very paradoxes of cultural creation,” notes Dalius Jonkus¹¹. Maceina dealt with the tragic being of culture, interpreting literary works such as those by Dostoyevsky, Rilke, Bible stories, and Lithuanian authors. One of the most suitable writers was Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas. His autobiographical novel *Altorių šešėly* (*In the Shadow of the Altar*, 1932-33), raises the problem of the incompatibility between the poet’s vocation and the priest’s ministry (the author broke his priestly vows after writing the novel and got married).

However, Mykolaitis-Putinas earned the name of a Promethean writer even earlier by writing the drama *Nuvainikuota vaidilutė* (*Crownless vestina*, 1927), in which he realized in artistic form the mythical explanation of the historical events, which had been existing in the Lithuanian historical imagination, and which was based on the analog of a Promethean exploit. According to historical chronicles and legends, the Grand Duke Kęstutis (1300-1382) married Birutė, the Vaidilutė (Vestina), who had consecrated her destiny to kindle the sacred fire and had taken a vow of chastity. Breaking her oath to the pagan gods, Birutė Prometheanly rises up and chooses to serve the people. The marriage of Birutė and Kęstutis gives birth to Vytautas, who becomes the Grand Duke – the reign of Vytautas (1392-1430) is now hailed as the golden age of Lithuania. Birutė thus seems to be the impetus for Lithuanian history to flourish. However, the punishment of the gods follows – Vytautas the Great dies before having a son. Lithuania’s glory slowly fades, and eventually, it loses its independence and falls under the yoke of Tsarist Russia. This peculiar suffering of the nation is the collective redemption of Birutė’s guilt, which ends only in the 20th century when independence is regained. Thus, an original

¹⁰ Maceina, Antanas. *Raštai*. T. 9. Vilnius, Margi raštai, 2004, p. 72.

¹¹ Jonkus, Dalius. Prometėjiška kultūros tragedija Antano Maceinos filosofijoje. In: *Filosofija. Sociologija*. 2009. T. 20. Nr. 1, p. 30.

interpretation is created, where the role of Prometheus is attributed not to a man but to a woman who initiates a breakthrough in culture.

Soviet period

Each country creates its own culture of memory, its own mythology. This is especially true for newly created empires that need legitimization. It is a well-known fact that old myths are used for the ideology of totalitarian regimes. The Soviets sought to use art as a flexible tool to create a new man – ‘homo sovieticus’ – seeing the whole working class as a collective Prometheus who would build communism – a new golden age without God.

Despite the myth constructed from above, real Prometheanism in the countries of the communist camps manifested itself as resistance to the totalitarian system, to the regime of persecution and censorship – as a struggle for individual rights and freedoms, for an authentic culture uncorrupted by ideology, which was longed for by the people behind the Iron Curtain.

Avoiding the second Soviet occupation and repressions after WWII in 1944, most of the Lithuanian intelligence left their native country, but Mykolaitis-Putinas stayed, regarding himself as too old for emigration. During Stalin’s reign, Mykolaitis-Putinas lived in internal exile and was constantly forced to write and celebrate the new era. After Stalin’s death and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, the Soviet ideology tried to be more flexible and more creative and needed talented artists to show that literary life was normal. In this period, Mykolaitis-Putinas turned to Myths and Legends, choosing to speak in so-called Aesop’s language. This type of writing remained a favorite technique of writers under Soviet censorship. One of the most excellent works of that time was the poem *The Prometheus* (1958) by Mykolaitis-Putinas. The emigre Lithuanians who formed a strong community and led cultural life in the USA were waiting for how writers behave in Soviet conditions. And Mykolaitis-Putinas managed to keep his poetry at the same high level. Poet Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas regarded the poem *Prometheus* as the best artistic work in the Lithuanian soviet literature. Fictional hero Prometheus at the end of the poem, puts into Heracles’ heart a desire for creation, for rebelling against authorities, for love and work, for eternal aspiration. The parallel between Prometheus and the artist’s suffering is also stressed. The whole poem had a significant impact on the Lithuanian reading public; it was perceived as a cure for Sovietisation, it inspired writers to be bolder in using Aesopic language to express their frustration and irony, and this language became the language of a secret imaginary community, until the collapse of the Soviets.

Post-Soviet period

The failure of the Soviet communist project and the collapse of the hated empire, the many joys of discovery and material worries, and the collapse of the planned economy pushed the myth of Prometheus out of the artists' sight—it was irrelevant for some time. A new actualization of this old myth has been gaining momentum with the advances of the digital revolution, the development of artificial intelligence, and the possibilities of modeling the virtual world of the future.

A new generation of writers has emerged in Lithuanian literature who were born or raised outside Lithuania, mainly in English-speaking countries, have become accustomed to global issues in media and literature, and are writing in English, which is more familiar to them and easier to handle. Here I would like to dwell on Ernestas Tyminas (b. 1993) and his book *AI Paradox: The Rise and Fall of Humanity* (2023).

The author openly draws on ancient myth, and comes close to the classic source, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Only here, Prometheus is not Dr. Noah, the scientist who created the artificial man, but his creation, artificial intelligence. This work is not carried out in secret but under the watchful eye of an entire (near-future) society, which lives as an imaginary community that communicates quickly thanks to video media. Thus, the creative process is public, and humanity awaits with anticipation and anxiety when Prometheus is untied from control.

Until that moment, Dr. Noah has been working to integrate into the artificial intelligence of the susceptibility abyss all the books written by humans from ancient times to the present – religious, scientific, fiction, music from all ages, works of art, sculpture, and other art, films, etc. In short, it seeks to humanize the artificial machine as much as possible, infect it with human civilization and culture, make it a patriot of this heritage, and arouse sympathy for man and humanity in general.

And he succeeds: Prometheus begins to serve the people by quickly and efficiently solving their energy, resource, or crime problems, installing eco-systems, designing bridges, and creating green spaces, in other words, establishing paradise on earth. However, that efficiency requires one condition: global digitalization. An omnipresent eye is watching every individual, and their behavior is monitored and controlled. Gradually, this begins to cause dissatisfaction, and leaders emerge, calling for the formation of uncontrolled valleys, zones free from surveillance, and a general revolt against Prometheus. The book's author, who is on Prometheus's side, resolves this logically possible conflict with Prometheus's humane act: in suffering, he withdraws from the zone of human activity, gradually switching himself off, extinguishing himself. Eventually, all that remains is the memory, the myth of the former AI Prometheus, which the adults tell their children.

Summary

Lithuania falls into what historian Timothy Snyder called the “Bloody Lands”¹². The past one and a half hundred years (about as long as Lithuanian literature has existed, if exclude medieval chronicles and religious literature) have been merciless for the Lithuanian nation – it has had to endure changes in political systems, it has been the subject of a communist experiment, and literature has spent many years under censorship, so the myth of Prometheus has been “tested” in extraordinary conditions. The universal myth of Prometheus proves its vitality and remains relevant from the beginning to the present day; it is eternal because, as is evident, nations and their problems change only slightly over the centuries. On the other hand, it is predictable that the meaning and significance of the transformations of this myth will be similar in the field of other European literatures – the trajectories of thought remain stable. However, each country brings unique experiences and original solutions to enrich this standard matrix of Prometheanism.

Bibliography

Baltrušaitis, Jurgis. *Dulkės ir žvaigždės: poezija*. Vilnius, Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 2013.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Prometheus und die Tragödie der Kultur [1946]. In: *Gadamer, Hans-Georg, Gesammelte Werke, IX: Ästhetik und Poetik II*. Tübingen, 1991, S. 151-160.

Jonkus, Dalius. Prometėjiška kultūros tragedija Antano Maceinos filosofijoje. In: *Filosofija. Sociologija*. 2009. T. 20. Nr. 1, p. 27-34.

Keturakis, Ugnius. *Prometheism in creative work of Jurgis Baltrušaitis and Giovanni Papini: summary of doctoral dissertation*. Kaunas, Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto leidykla, 2010.

Kvietkauskas, Mindaugas. Prometėjiškoji pasaulėvoka Jono Biliūno prozoje. In: *Metai*, 2005, nr. 12, p. 80-93.

Maceina, Antanas. *Raštai*. T. 9. Vilnius, Margi raštai, 2004.

Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York, Basic Books, 2010.

Брюсов, Валерий. *Собрание сочинений*, т. 6. Москва, Художественная литература, 1975.

¹² Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York, Basic Books, 2010.