

Eugenijus ŽMUIDA<sup>1</sup>

**Divine Transcription of European History as Accident  
in Ignas Šeinius' Satirical Novel *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe***

**Abstract**

The article based on the comparative principle seeks to introduce to a wide audience the unique novel by Lithuanian writer Ignas Šeinius *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* (1934), which mocks the ideology of the Third Reich. Its intertextuality fascinates – the story involves many popular “wandering plots” known in literature and myths. Šeinius goes into a dispute with the tradition of science fiction, argues with it and expands it by offering unexpected solutions. At the same time, the work raises global ideas, contemplates the course of human history and discusses its alternatives. The conclusion is that the novel has received too little attention and evaluation, which have resulted in its belated translation into English.

**Keywords:** Lithuanian literature; intertextuality; science fiction; Nazi ideology

**Résumé**

**La correction divine de l'histoire d'Europe, considérée comme le hasard dans le roman satyrique  
d'Ignas Šeinius *Le Rajeunissement de Siegfried Immerselbe***

Cet article basé sur le principe comparatif cherche à présenter à un large public le roman unique de l'écrivain lituanien Ignas Šeinius *Le rajeunissement de Siegfried Immerselbe* (1934), qui se moque de l'idéologie du troisième Reich. Son intertextualité fascine - l'histoire comprend de nombreuses «intrigues errantes» populaires connues dans la littérature et les mythes. Šeinius se dispute avec la tradition de la science-fiction, la conteste et l'élargit en proposant des solutions inattendues. Dans le même temps, le travail soulève des idées globales, examine le cours de l'histoire humaine et discute de ses alternatives. La conclusion est que le roman a reçu trop peu d'attention et d'évaluation pour une traduction tardive en anglais.

**Mots-clés :** littérature lituanienne ; intertextualité ; science-fiction ; idéologie nazie

**Introduction**

Goethe's *Faust* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus*, both written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have developed old myths of humankind and have inspired the modern European literature to reconsider the human spiritual and physical youth and immortality. In his novel *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* (1934) Lithuanian writer Ignas Šeinius engages in a fantastic literary game, rethinking and parodying the “eternal” themes in the epoch when the Nazis come to power in Germany declaring their goals to change the World and create a new perfect man. Therefore, Šeinius' novel was actual and brave in its satiric style. It was also very insightful. In the comparative perspective, the novel evolves interactive communication developing intriguing controversy with the tradition of European scientific fantasy literature.

<sup>1</sup> Eugenijus Žmuida [Еугенијус Жмуїда], Doctor of Philology, Researcher at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (Vilnius).

### Ignas Šeinius and the Context of the Lithuanian Literature

The abundance of intertextual references in this novel was a unique phenomenon in Lithuanian literature of that time. Lithuanian literature has entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the most difficult conditions in Europe. Until 1904, the use of the Lithuanian language in public was forbidden and the Latin alphabet was banned for 40 years in this Russian-occupied country. There was no legal periodic press, in schools or gymnasiums no subject taught in a national language (the University of Vilnius was closed in 1832). However, national culture and literature survived. The difficult conditions brought the nation into an imaginary community. The first such community was organized by Bishop Motiejus Valančius<sup>2</sup> who organized publishing books abroad (in Prussia) and helped their secret spreading net in Lithuania. Though many book-smugglers and book readers have been punished or even deported to Siberia<sup>3</sup>, the press ban did not bring the expected fruit and was cancelled in 1904. Therefore, first Lithuanian novels were written only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also important to note, that after Polish-Lithuanian political uprising in 1863 and the press ban in 1864, the Polish language ceased to be the dominant language of culture in Lithuania. The Lithuanian national revival began, and peasants started to educate their children more widely. It helped to form new national (Lithuanian) intellectual elite. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lithuanian intellectuals sought education in various European countries; as well as in Russian big cities; so, they got involved early in modernist fashion literature and art.

Ignas Šeinius (born Ignas Jurkūnas, 1889–1959) belongs to the first generation of Lithuanian literary modernists. Never having had higher education, Šeinius develops independently, writes in the Lithuanian press, debuts as a literary artist in 1908, and actively participates in the creation of Lithuanian modernist magazines. At the beginning of the Great War, the leader of the Lithuanian Committee<sup>4</sup> Martynas Yčas sends him to Sweden for agitation and cultural work. Since 1915 Šeinius' fate is associated with Scandinavia and the culture of the four Nordic countries. He creates a family there and becomes a bilingual writer (writes in Lithuanian and Swedish). But even before, in the first fictional works by Šeinius – the novel *Kuprelis* [*Hunchback*, 1913] and several unfinished novels and short stories, – it is seen a peculiarity of his style where dominated the inner monologue, fragmentation,

---

<sup>2</sup> Motiejus Valančius (1801–1875) was a Catholic bishop of Samogitia, historian and one of the best known Lithuanian/Samogitian writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He expanded and improved the Samogitian parochial school network, wrote many religious books, and in 1858 inaugurated a temperance movement, which grew to encompass nearly a million members, almost half of the county's population.

<sup>3</sup> In East Prussia since 1864 up to 1896, more than 3 500 000 copies of publications in Lithuanian language was published: about 500 000 primers, more than 300 000 scientific secular editions, 75 000 newspapers and other types of publications. See in: Bružas, Rimas (2013). *Tauta be valstybės* [*The Nation without a State*]. Vilnius: Vaga, p. 79 (in Lithuanian).

<sup>4</sup> The Lithuanian Society for Victims of War was established in November 1914.

and lyricism. This kind of “impressionistic” writing, as critics noted, was the result of his fascination with Knut Hamsun<sup>5</sup>.

Šeinius’ artistic works could be divided into two categories, not only in terms of languages but also in terms of worldview and style. They could be relatively termed as “impressionistic” and “expressionistic”. His second novel *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* (1934) firmly represents the expressionistic (ironic and satirical) style. Such worldview and writing style became dominant in the second half of Šeinius life. As mentioned, the novel *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* shows the virtuoso game in popular myths. The intertextual links were rare in Lithuanian literature in the 1930s when realism or introspection-type literature dominated. Expressionist modernism was rather shocking and unacceptable to the public, as Lithuanian culture was still very young and not accustomed to the multi-layered art. However, authors like Šeinius, who had lived in Western Europe for a long time, brought new ways of writing to Lithuanian literature and helped be closer to European level<sup>6</sup>. If we use literary history models (say, Northrop Frye’s), we will notice that Lithuanian literature managed to change all four literary modalities only in three decades, (if we count from 1904 – the end of the press ban until 1934, when Šeinius’ novel was published), and in Šeinius’ and others pioneering works it has already entered the fourth, satirical phase, covering all modernist art<sup>7</sup>.

### **An Ironic Play with “Wandering” Plots**

Šeinius’ novel *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* refreshes the six "wandering" plots<sup>8</sup> that bring with them a certain semantic load. First of all, it is a German heroic epic (saga) *Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200). From this German text, the author borrows the hero's nationality (German) and name (Siegfried). Epic hero's fight against the dragon corresponds with Siegfried Immerselbe's struggle against the rising dragon of the Third Reich. The battle theme, in turn, reminds of the story of the Old Testament hero, David, who defeated the giant Goliath. It is no coincidence that the appearance of the refurbished Immerselbe is based on the sculpture “David” by the Italian Renaissance artist Donatello<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The associative relationship with Knut Hamsun's style was noted after the second authorization of the novel in 1932, because the criticism at that time was too weak for such comparison.

<sup>6</sup> The first futuristic and expressionistic experiments appeared in the field of poetry (magazine *Keturi vėjai* [Four Winds], 1922–1928). In the field of prose, Šeinius was overtaken by his constant competitor in diplomacy and literature Jurgis Sačvickis, who lived and worked in Sweden; Sačvickis published at that time two collections of short stories: *Šventadienio soenetai* [The Sonnets of Holy Days] 1922, *Prie aukšto sosto* [At the High Throne], 1928. Sačvickis was also not understood and not well received by contemporary critics.

<sup>7</sup> Frye, Northrop. 1973. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, p. 61–62.

<sup>8</sup> The term “wandering plot” is borrowed from Zirmunskij, Viktor M. See his book *Sravnitel'noe literaturovedenie. Vostok i zapad (Izbrannye trudy)* (Comparative Literature: East and West). Leningrad: Nauka, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> This mythical duel was emphasized by the author at the end of the novel in rejuvenated Siegfried duel for a woman (young Ese Oderstein) with his former student, the worshiper of German nationalism, heavyweight Tom Hardt (Šeinius, 1965, 234).

The desire for the rejuvenation of the novel's protagonist and many other episodes point to Fausto's story. The motive of redemption (of the whole German nation), prayer and conversation with the Lord allows Siegfried Immerselbe to be compared to Christ, redeemer of the whole humankind. At the end of the book, the author raises a parallel with two other characters – the eternal Jew and the Flying Dutchman. Siegfried Immerselbe – condemned to forever wandering, and deprived of German nationality, – is no longer admitted to his homeland but persecuted as a traitor: “Even his right to call himself a German has been taken away. Left without a country, he can only shuttle back and forth between ports on a ship. Everywhere a guest, everywhere a stranger...” (Šeinius, 1965, 246).

It is possible to extend the list of “wandering” plots in the novel and add several other links. One, known in various mythologies, would be associated with dying and rising gods. In Egypt, this is the myth of Osiris, which in turn is associated with the initiation ritual, i. e. – a test that is common in various cultures. During the ritual, the protagonist must “die” and “resurrect”. In the novel, the equivalent of a ritual is a medical experiment that changes not only the social status of the neophytes but also the state of consciousness. In the article “Faustful Variations of Ignas Šeinius”, Lithuanian critic Juozas Laurušas offers to look for parallels with the classics of European fiction and satire, such as Herbert Wells, Karel Čapek, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Aldous Huxley (Laurušas, 2001, 41). When we compare Šeinius' novel with science fiction, we could look not only at Šeinius' contemporaries (Mikhail Bulgakov, Orson Wells, Aldous Huxley, or Hugo Gernsback) but also at their 19<sup>th</sup> predecessors, especially Mary Shelley, the pioneer of science fiction and her novel *Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus* (1821) (Aldiss, 1995, 78).

Obviously, the story of the creation of man is derived from the old myths – the Greek Prometheus, used as a subtitle of the Shelley book, Adam and Eve's story, and other worldwide known myths. The association with the Bible's story of the first people is strengthened in Shelley's novel by the requirement of a Frankenstein's monster to create him a woman (the protagonist of Šeinius' novel is also feverishly looking for a woman). In addition to distant mythological repercussions, Shelley was influenced by the strong tradition of the Gothic novel in England (Shelley's novel is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable achievements of this tradition) and John Milton's Poem *Lost Paradise* (1667), where is created an impressive picture of a revolted Satan, which has become a significant figure in English romanticism (Leonard, 2000, XII). Šeinius' novel about human creation by the experimental test in a laboratory is close to Shelley's idea of creating a human being from the parts of dead bodies. Surprisingly, this similarity has not been noticed so far. In Šeinius' novel, a person is not newly created but is remade and remodelled. In Shelley's time, such a process could be imagined only as mechanical, that is, performed by a medical operation and using little known, and mysterious electrical energy.

Šeinius already “uses” genetic engineering: newly introduced genes not only rejuvenate the body but also “reprograms” the inner world of the hero: he is transformed mentally, and thus changes the value orientation. As a result, Siegfried’s thinking and beliefs “turn” to the opposite: the former ideologist of Nazi propaganda starts passionately and reasonably to criticize the idea of the Third Reich, to promote the German-Jewish spiritual and physical union, and to write a theoretical work “Grundlage für eine neue Menschenheit” [“New Foundations of Humanity”]. Now he is opposing himself (former Siegfried). Usually, an experiment in science fiction with a human is a failure. As a rule, a newly constructed person is an unhappy, frightening, repulsive, and suffering subject. Šeinius breaks this cliché. The experiment is crowned with success: it creates a happy, self-satisfied person (hybrid) who discovers the meaning in life and is overflowed by creative ideas. In this aspect, it is a direct antipode of Shelley’s monster. The unnamed creature of Victor Frankenstein rebels against his creator. Victor seeks to destroy his creature. In Šeinius’ novel, Italian professor Gonzalo, the head of a modern private clinic, and his assistant Petras Inketonis (the only one Lithuanian character in the novel) could be happy for their first successful experiment and for the appearance and activities of rejuvenated Siegfried. The main joke of the plot is in a secret plan of revenge implemented by the young assistant Inketonis. During the Great War while Lithuania was occupied by Germany, one of the German officers, the same Immerselbe, had roughly dealt with Inketonis’ parents and him, a little boy. So now, Inketonis recognizes this person and decides to take an act of revenge. While operating on Siegfried, to rejuvenate the German patient, Inketonis uses the strongest hormones, taken from a young Jewish woman. However, the synthesis of different hormones suddenly surpasses the expected results and brings an excellent fruit. Such a polemic relationship with the tradition of fantastic science fiction in Šeinius’ work extends the boundaries of this genre; ironic wit refers to the playful nature of such “biographies”. The motto of the soul's sale to the devil used in Faust's history here corresponds to Immerselbe's agreement to participate in a risky operation at an Italian clinic. However, the result of the loss of soul here, as mentioned, is reversed. Inketonis “kills” the “bad” (hardened Nazi) Immerselbe's soul and gives him a new one – “good” and “bright”. Siegfried Immerselbe becomes the apostle of new knowledge. In a little crazy way Šeinius reinterprets the theme of human improvement, at the same time developing a broader idea of parallel reality, an alternative “possible world”. It is important to note that the prospect of a different historical development is not raised retrospectively but in the run-up to events<sup>10</sup>. “In that sense, *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* is an exclusive

---

<sup>10</sup> The world-famous Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, created from personal Chaplin funds, appeared on screens only in October 1940.

phenomenon not only in Lithuanian but also in the world literature, where we can hardly find an earlier such an antinationalistic engaged epic work,” – noted Laurušas (Laurušas, 2001, 41).

The “open” character of Šeinius’ novel attracts to himself popular literary types. These well-known names not only expand the semantic field of the Šeinius novel but also acquire a new treatment. Siegfried Immerselbe, who can be called Faust, Adam, David, Christ, Prometheus, and the Eternal Jew, is an antipode to all them, a trickster, and a carnivalesque variation of them all. All the “serious” or even tragic plots of humanity’s spiritual searches are reinterpreted by Šeinius<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, Šeinius is keeping them in proper respect. The irony touches the unhealthy German nationalism that raised, among other things, the slogan of creating a new man, a superman, and the protagonist who remains satirically depicted until the end of the novel.

This is the most important message of the novel. Worldwide known tragic conflicts are resolved positively. All this suggests a deep enough thought that history of humankind and the accompanying myths are just a game that could be “played” for a better end. History is also possible without “blood” if only a history making persons could maintain a healthy mind and a certain ironic distance. Wisdom is the best way to protect mind-boggling and blinding ideas – such is the idea of Šeinius novel, universal and relevant at all times.

In the final chapters of the novel Šeinius enters into the “war of worlds” perspective. Siegfried understands himself as the pioneer of the new epoch in human history and compares himself with Moses, Chris, and Marx. “It is not for his own advantage that he has been rejuvenated and made a new man, but for that all Germany and of the whole world!” (Šeinius, 1965, 158). Successful hormone implantation and a radical change of the mind of the German ideologist are at the heart of the world. The world is waiting for this book which to be released in many languages (including Russian and Chinese) in the same day. Siegfried is worried about how to distribute a book in Germany: simply throwing it out of the airplane (but such a “bombarded” “could knock somebody unconscious” (223) or having use a nice landing by little parachutes (but Brownshirts could catch them...). The printed book beats all the records. Siegfried every morning reads the reviews of the world’s newspapers. Šeinius “quotes” what *Le Temps*, *Journal de Genève*, *The Times*, *Pravda*, *Popolo d’Italia*, and other writes. *Manchester Guardian* gives Bernard Shaw’ and Herbert Welles’ opinion on this extraordinary event. However, in German press, Siegfried’s name is cursed, his books are publicly burned in the central squares of big German cities... This failure in homeland and the fact that he failed to marry his heart-captured Jewish Salome Moseblum (another strong-indicated name), saddles Siegfried – a little

---

<sup>11</sup> Probably we should agree with Ben Hutchinson statement “comparative literature is both the most natural and the most constructed intellectual activities.” Ben Hutchinson. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2018, p. 2.



lonely and tragic, we see him at the end of the novel. This final portrait symbolically conveys Šeinius' flair that his novel would not be understood and accepted, and the world community will remain blind and ideologically fragmented.

### Conclusion

The works of Ignas Šeinius, one of the first and most prominent modern Lithuanian prose writers, is rich in cultural references<sup>12</sup>. Their greatest concentration is in the revitalizing novel *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe*, which is also interesting as a "dialogical" novel, developing an intriguing controversy with the tradition of European science fiction. There is no other Lithuanian novel that would achieve the concentration of intertextual references similar to that of Šeinius. *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* is unique not only in Lithuanian but also in European literature – manipulating the “serious” materials and even “more serious” theme of the Third Reich and the impending war. In this aspect, the novel approaches the poetics of postmodernism. Willing to be a politician throughout his life, and well-versed in European moods, Šeinius shows a far-reaching insight (which was lacking in Europe at that time) that the creation of the Third Reich will be a misguided experiment in social engineering worthy of contempt. Published in 1934, *Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe* did not yet have an adequate audience in Lithuania (it was too early for local critics to perceive the novelty of the novel), translated and issued in English only in 1965 (seemingly too late) this unique work by Šeinius remained little known in Lithuania and almost unknown in the world Literature.

### References

- Aldiss, Brian. 1995. *The Detached Retina: Aspects of SF and Fantasy*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 1973. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press.
- Hutchinson, Ben. 2018. *Comparative Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mythical plots in all works by Šeinius are reviewed in my previous article titled “From Hunchback to Centaurus” (in Lithuanian): Eugenijus Žmuida. „Nuo Kuprelio iki Kentauro: mitopoetinės Igno Šeiniaus potekstės“ in: *Acta Litteraria Comparativa*, 2017, nr. 8, p. 46-61. <http://alc.leu.lt/index.php/alc/article/view/33>

Laurušas, Juozas. 2001. „Faustiškios Ingo Šeinaus variacijos“. [“The Faustful variations by Ignas Šeinius”]. In Ignas Šeinius: prozininkas, dramaturgas, politikas.[Ignas Šeinius: a prosaic, dramatist, politician], Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas.

Šeinius, Ignas. 1965. Rejuvenation of Siegfried Immerselbe. Translated by Albinas Baranauskas. New York: Manyland Books.