

Viktorija Šeina

(Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius)

PERNICIOUS CITY: MYTHOLOGIZATION OF KAUNAS IN THE LITHUANIAN LITERATURE OF THE INTERWAR PERIOD

1. INTRODUCTION

The depiction of Kaunas in the Lithuanian literature of the interwar period serves as a quantitative and qualitative threshold in the urbanization process of Lithuanian literature. The first instances of Lithuanian literature which included reflections on the experience of a modern city appeared at the beginning of the 20th century.¹ However, they were sporadic in nature and did not represent any major influence of urbanization on Lithuanian culture. This was because Lithuania did not boast many big cities at that time, and not many ethnic Lithuanians resided in Vilnius, Kaunas and Klaipėda. In the 1920s, the urbanization of Lithuanian literature was intensified by numerous individual and often episodic experiences of West European cities resulting from more frequent travels and studies of Lithuanian writers at foreign universities during the independence period.² The whole body of urban Lithuanian literature is reminiscent of a picturesque mosaic of impressions inspired by individual cities of Western Europe and the Russian Empire, which is totally clearly devoid of any common features that could form a clear set of implications characteristic of any specific city. At the end of the 1920s – the beginning of the 1930s, the situation changed drastically when numerous novels, short stories and poems about Kaunas appeared.

These literary representations of Kaunas were a product of certain particular historical circumstances. In January 1919, the temporary government of the independent Republic of Lithuania, which had been established a year earlier, was moved to Kaunas in order to escape the attacks of the Red Army on Vilnius. This was how Kaunas *de facto* became the temporary capital of Lithuania. The initial hope was that this situation would not last for long. However, the conflict with

¹ These were proletarian short stories by Jonas Biliūnas and poems by Julius Janonis, some short stories by Ignas Šeinius and Jurgis Savickis, and a poem by Kleopas Jurgelionis.

² Short stories by Jurgis Savickis, poem *Miestas* [The City] by Balys Sruoga (1922), the poem *Vokiškas pavasaris* [German spring] by Kazys Binkis (1921), the poems *Berlyne* [In Berlin] and *Tysliava Paryžiuje* [Tysliava in Paris] by Juozas Tysliava (both dating back to 1926), a series of poems *Dainos apie svyruojančius gluosnius* [Songs about weeping willows] by Kazys Boruta (1927), etc.

neighboring Poland over the ethnically mixed Region of Vilnius continued for two years. Consequently, the historical capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania remained separated from Lithuania and was part of the Republic of Poland until 1939. Thus, Kaunas was the temporary capital of Lithuania throughout the interwar period.

Over the twenty years of independence until the Soviet occupation, Kaunas underwent extremely swift territorial and demographic growth. According to historical calculations, the area of the city expanded nearly sevenfold (to 3,940 ha), and the population showed an eightfold increase (and reached almost 155,000).³ At the beginning of the 1920s, when government institutions of established Lithuania, including various establishments of higher education and major industrial companies, began operating in Kaunas, the greatest ever migration of Lithuanians from rural areas to the city started. It was the first time in the history of major cities of Lithuania that Lithuanians made up the majority ethnic group in the city.⁴ For the first time in the history of Lithuanian cities, Lithuanians became the dominant ethnic community, forming a social stratum of urban residents; a national urban culture emerged, and it was a unique phenomenon which combined the norms of city life of the tsarist Russia, a fervent but mostly superficial transference of the elements of the Western city culture, and characteristics of rural mentality.

During the interwar period, both Kaunas society and the city itself underwent radical changes. Over a surprisingly short period of time, the provincial fortress town turned into a city boasting exquisite modern architecture and a vibrant cultural life. In the light of these drastic changes, Lithuanian society was forced to urgently learn to tame the new urban environment, rethink their relations with the rapidly changing reality of their city and try out their new urban identity. All this effort resulted in the formation of “the temporary capital literature” – a body of miscellaneous fiction texts about Kaunas that varied greatly in artistic quality, style and genre. It was the first time in the history of Lithuanian literature that a process of creating a literary myth about a specific city started to take shape and manifested itself in the formation of a clearly defined field of symbolic meanings of the city, specific topics of Kaunas, character types and invariant plot.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

For the purpose of the research, out of all possible approaches to literary urban studies, I chose the semiotic approach to the city as a semantic structure attributed to it by the perceiver. Historically, representatives of the French school

³ Evaldas Bakonis, “Laikinoji sostinė” [Temporary capital], *Lietuvos istorija: iliustruota enciklopedija* [Lithuanian History: Illustrated Encyclopaedia] (Kaunas: Šviesa, 2012), 259.

⁴ In 1897, Lithuanians accounted for as little as 6.6% of Kaunas’s city dwellers, whereas in 1923 Lithuanians already amounted to 59% of city dwellers. (*Miestiečiai: vilniečių ir kauniečių tapatumo, savivokos ir požiūrių sociologinė analizė* [Urban dwellers: Sociological analysis of identity, self-awareness and approaches of Vilnius and Kaunas dwellers], ed. Eugenija Krukauskienė (Vilnius: Lietuvos filosofijos ir sociologijos institutas, 1997), 11).

of semiotics were the first to postulate urban semiotics (back in the 1960s–1970s), but as a literary research methodology, urban semiotics was developed ten years later by Vladimir Toporov of the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school. He developed the concept of the *Petersburg text*, which mainly forms the basis for this research.⁵ This concept is mostly used for the purpose of research in Russian literature (with the aim to analyze both the Petersburg text and literary reflections of other cities⁶). In addition, it is also used for the purpose of other literary research, for example, studies of the Vilnius text in Russian, Polish, Yiddish and Lithuanian literature.⁷

Toporov invokes binary oppositions to identify the Petersburg semantic paradigm that exists in Russian literature, which he refers to as the *Petersburg text* of Russian literature. Not all sources are equally important in terms of reconstructing such a paradigm. The Petersburg text is a separate object of study from analyses of the Petersburg themes or motifs in literature. According to the scholar, the city text is a super-textual construct, which requires more than a mere depiction of individual empiric components of mundane city life in literature. According to Toporov, the authors of the Petersburg text managed to perceive and convey in their literary works that “super-empirical” reality related to the very essence of the city, but they did not need to overlook its empirical aspects and realia.

⁵ Владимир Н. Топоров, “Петербург и Петербургский текст русской литературы” [Petersburg and the Petersburg text in Russian literature], in idem, *Петербургский текст русской литературы: Избранные труды* [Petersburg texts in Russian literature: Selection] (Санкт-Петербург: Искусство-СПБ, 2003), 7–118. There are a number of other articles by Toporov on mythopoetics that are equally important in terms of literary research into urban semiotics: Владимир Н. Топоров, *Миф. Ритуал. Символ. Образ: Исследования в области мифопоэтического: Избранное* [Myth. Ritual. Symbol. Image: Research into mythopoetics] (Москва: Прогресс, 1995); Владимир Н. Топоров, “Текст города-девы и города-блудницы в мифологическом аспекте” [Mythopoetic aspects of virgin-city text and promiscuous girl-city text], in *Исследования по структуре текста* [Research into Text Structure] (Москва: Наука, 1987), 121–32; Владимир Н. Топоров, “Пространство и текст” [Space and text], in *Текст: семантика и структура* [Text: Semantics and structure] (Москва: Наука, 1983), 227–84.

⁶ Andrew Reynolds, “Returning the Ticket: Joseph Brodsky’s ‘August’ and the End of the Petersburg Text,” *Slavic Review* 64, no. 2 (Summer, 2005), 307–32; Sarah J. Young, John Levin, “Mapping Machines: Transformations of the Petersburg Text,” *Primerjalna književnost* 36, issue 2 (2013), 151–62; Ian K. Lilly, “Conviviality in the Prerevolutionary ‘Moscow Text’ of Russian Culture,” *The Russian Review* 63, issue 3 (July 2004), 427–48, etc.

⁷ Владимир Н. Топоров, “Vilnius, Wilno, Вильна: город и миф” [Vilnius, Wilno, Вильна: City and Myth], in *Балто-славянские этноязыковые контакты* [Ethno-linguistic contacts between Baltic and Slavic people] (Москва: Наука, 1980), 3–71; Валентина Брио, *Поэзия и поэтика города: Wilno–ווילנע–Vilnius* [City poetry and poetics: Wilno–ווילנע–Vilnius] (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2008); Pavel Lavrinec, “Rusiškas Vilniaus tekstas” [Vilnius text of Russian culture], in *Naujasis Vilniaus perskaitymas: didieji Lietuvos istoriniai pasakojimai ir daugiakultūrinis miesto paveldas* [The new reading of Vilnius: great historic stories of Lithuania and multicultural city heritage] (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2009), 257–78; Idem, “Мицкевич alias Ленин: к семантике персонажа вильнюсского текста” [Mickiewicz alias Lenin: About the semantics of characters in the Vilnius texts], *Respectus philologicus* 5 (10) (2004), 64–76; Tomas Venclova, “Vilniaus ir Talino tekstai” [Vilnius and Tallinn texts], in idem, *Pertrūkis tikrovėje: straipsniai apie literatūrą ir kultūrą* [Split in reality: Articles on literature and culture] (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2013), 399–415; Инга Видугирите, “Вильна” Константина Бальмонта: русский голос в вильнюсском тексте литовской литературы [Wilna by Konstantin Balmont: Russian voice in the Vilnius texts of Lithuanian literature], *Literatūra* 53 (2) (2011), 17–25.

Toporov analyzes the literary image of Petersburg in the light of mythopoetics, which allows him to study literary works in terms of symbolic, archetypal and mythological manifestations of existence. He claims that prominent literary works themselves generate myths and symbols and thus pave the path for various archetypes leading from the dark of the subconsciousness to the light of the consciousness.⁸ Toporov defines mythologization as a process of creating the most semantically spacious and extremely suggestive shapes of reality which have the power of examples.⁹

Toporov explains the specific nature of the literary Petersburg myth through a semantic substrate of the Petersburg text – a body of underlying meanings that form the text as such, i.e. its semiotic potential consisting of natural, material, spiritual and historical dimensions. According to the researcher, this substrate is determined by the real features characteristic of a city, including some specific selection principles applicable to them. In addition to several other factors pertaining to urban nature that appear in the Petersburg text of Russian literature, Toporov singles out the positioning of the city on an edge or rather on a dividing line between the sea and the land as the most important one. Quite a number of natural-climatic motifs characteristic of the Petersburg text are related to the element of water (fog, rain, humidity, slush, etc.). The specific nature of the borderline between land and water determined the characteristic plot of the Petersburg texts presented in a number of variations by different authors, namely the flood and the main character trying to escape it or balancing on the verge of life and death.¹⁰

Not all aspects of the urban study methodology suggested by Toporov are appropriate for the purpose of research into the literary image of Kaunas in Lithuanian literature. Toporov firmly believed in the uniqueness of the city of Petersburg. According to him, compared to other cities, the northern capital of Russia is exceptional in that it is an especially powerful myth generator, and its mythologization in Russian literature of various periods stems from the symbolic power of the legend about the way it was founded.¹¹ This is exactly what allows deliberating about the Petersburg text as a super-textual construct bound by certain semantic dominants.

Even though Toporov does not deny the historical development of the Petersburg myth, he mostly studies the 19th-century Russian literary texts and at the same time aims to search for a semantic dominant in the urban text that would be universal, time-resistant and immanent in the city (its topography, landscape, legend about its founding). In the case of the Lithuanian temporary capital, historical boundaries are of critical importance, because twenty years of independence is a unique period in the history of Kaunas, an interruption in its continuous cultural development.

⁸ Топоров, *Миф. Ритуал. Символ. Образ: Исследования в области мифопоэтического*, 4.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 5.

¹⁰ Топоров, “Петербург и Петербургский текст русской литературы”, 28.

¹¹ Toporov has never talked about applying the concept of the Petersburg text to other cities. Moreover, he even said that the Moscow text has never reached the final stage of formation in Russian literature. Nonetheless, over the recent decades Russian researchers published numerous articles and studies analyzing the Moscow, Venice and other urban texts in Russian literature.

The culture of interwar Kaunas was mainly created by the emerging Lithuanian urban society that itself originated from rural areas. Here it is important to mention that the new dwellers of Kaunas were rather negative about the previous urban heritage dating back to the governorate period and strived to create an entirely new city and to place new symbolic spatial accents by highlighting the Lithuanian elements of the city and the actual face of Kaunas through placing the cultural focus on the West.

Novels, dramas and poems of the interwar Kaunas contain no signs of any historical urban reflection. The impression is that in the collective consciousness of the new residents of Kaunas, the city functioned as a world that was born alongside with Lithuania's independence and the new status of the temporary capital city. All this allows depicting the temporary capital as a closed "epoch" in the history of Kaunas, which had very little to do with the urban history period of czarist Russia. It is only obvious that Kaunas has no uniform literary text of its own, at least not one of the type discussed in the context of Toporov's research. As of the end of the 18th century, when the first anonymous Lithuanian poem about Kaunas was written (it was published only in the second half of the 20th century¹²), until the 21st century, the vector of literary reflections on Kaunas changed radically many times and the emerging literary tradition was disrupted time and again by various important political, historical and demographic changes in the life of the city. For example, in the 19th century, the mythopoetic tradition of Kaunas¹³ emerged in Polish romantic literature, even though it was absolutely "forgotten" and abandoned by Lithuanian authors of the interwar period. The establishment of the temporary capital is a clear baseline that marks the start of an entirely new period of literary reflections on Kaunas: the emergence of the temporary capital text with its own characteristic semantic dominants, arch-plot, character types and other features.

Having in mind the specific nature of the literary image of interwar Kaunas, the methodological approaches of this article have been constructed in line with the urban study methodology of Tartu–Moscow and French semiotic schools. Even though representatives of both of the above schools use the concept of urban mythology, they attribute a slightly different meaning to it. It has already been mentioned that Toporov's research on the Petersburg text speaks about the features of myth generation that are immanently characteristic of Petersburg and resistant to historical changes as well as determined by the legend about the founding of the city, including its geographic position and topography. At the same time, Algirdas Julien Greimas in his work on topological semiotics speaks about modern or secondary mythologies that are generated by ideological systems, which are determined by various historical situations.¹⁴ According to the scholar,

¹² "Aš, Lučinskas, – benderdarbis" [I am Lučinskas, a cooper], in *Giesmė muzikėlio (Iš XVI–XIX a. anoniminės lietuvių poezijos)* [The song of the kern: From anonymous Lithuanian poetry of the 16th–19th Century] (Vilnius: Vaga, 1982), 37–38.

¹³ In the 19th-century fiction – poem *Konrad Wallenrod* by Adam Mickiewicz (1828) and poem *Witoloranda* [Witol's lament], 1846) by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski – the legend of Kaunas as a religious center of pagan Lithuania resulting from romantic historiography became the core of the Kaunas myth.

¹⁴ Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Pour une sémiotique topologique," in idem, *Sémiotique et sciences sociales* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1976), 136–37.

after the industrial revolution it is no longer possible to speak about a single unique city myth, because several co-existing value systems determine the whole array of different isotopies in reading a city. For the purpose of this article, the literary mythologization of Kaunas is based on the methodological assumption made by Greimas saying that the existence of specific mythologemes in a literary text stems from the actual worldview of the author which determines the tendency to perceive certain objective urban traits (not limited to landscape or architecture alone, but spanning wider and encompassing both society and culture) by creating positive or negative symbolic images of a city. In other words, mythology is perceived as a figurative ideological structure.

If mythology is understood as a reflection on the existing world order, we must admit that any changes in the surrounding world inevitably result in corrections to the mythical structure formed in the collective conscience over previous periods in history. The independent state of Lithuania established in 1918 had to be given a mythical sense as a newly born social and political community. In this case, the myth of a capital city (be it temporary or permanent) bears special importance. According to Georg Lukács, the imagery of a capital city in urban novels represents a sum of the deepest and most typical issues faced by a nation.¹⁵

Thus, by combining the semiotic methodologies developed by Toporov and Greimas, the aim of this article is to identify the trends in the mythopoetics of the interwar Kaunas by focusing on: (1) the semantic substrate that generates the mythical story of the temporary capital under respective historical circumstances; and (2) the worldview, including the collective consciousness, that is revealed by the whole array of symbols used for the purpose of creating the literary myth of the temporary capital.

3. TEMPORARY CAPITAL AS A TRIAL IN THE NOVEL *ALTORIŲ ŠEŠĖLY* BY VINCAS MYKOLAITIS-PUTINAS

The development of the contemporary West European novel is closely related to the city. The most significant novels of the first quarter of the 20th century are by large “megapolis chronicles”: Dublin in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the mythologized image of Prague in Franz Kafka’s *Process*, etc.¹⁶ The first Lithuanian psychological intellectual novel was *Altorių šešėly* [In the shadow of altars] (1932–1933) by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas (1893–1967). It also happens to be the most significant work among those constructing the literary myth of

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Vol. 1: *Die Grablegung des alten Deutschland. Essays zur deutschen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt–Taschenbuch–Verlag, 1970), 22.

¹⁶ Вячеслав Иванов, “К семиотическому изучению культурной истории большого города” [On semiotic studies of cultural history of a big city], in idem, *Избранные труды по семиотике и истории культуры* [Selection of Works on Semiotics and Cultural History], vol. 4: *Семиотика культуры, искусства, науки* [Semiotics of culture, art and science] (Москва: Языки русской культуры, 2007), 177.

the temporary capital. This part of the article focuses on the symbolic images attributed to Kaunas of the 1920s as presented in Part III (titled “Liberation”) of the novel *Altorių šešėly*, including its panoramic views, specific atmosphere characteristic of the city and portraits of city dwellers.

3.1. LOW-RISE CITY

As mentioned before, the literary myth of the city is constructed by intentionally selecting those objective features of the city that allegedly most accurately reflect the essence of the city, that is, its *diferentia specifica*. By doing so, some urban notions are highlighted and specifically emphasized in a literary text, whereas the rest stay in the background or disappear altogether. This collection of urban elements representing a number of various dimensions (natural, material, cultural, historical) on the basis of which the literary myth of a city gets constructed is referred to by Toporov as the semantic substrate.

The literary image of the temporary capital created in Part III of the novel *Altorių šešėly* was mainly determined by the architectural peculiarities of Kaunas, which resulted from the fortification requirements dating back to 1887 and limiting the height of civilian buildings in Kaunas (the czarist administration started constructing military fortifications around the city and only allowed the construction of low-rise residential houses not exceeding two floors). Until the mid-1920s, Kaunas retained all the features of an out-of-the-way center of the Russian Empire, such as muddy streets full of potholes, low-rise and mostly wooden houses, miserable stores and horse-driven trams. The temporary capital of the 1920s lacked most of the features of a civilized city. In the context of continuing fights for Lithuania’s independence and remaining uncertainty regarding the fate of Vilnius, the new administration of Kaunas saw no hurry to invest in the economy, infrastructure or cityscape of the temporary capital. It was only after all military operations were over and the borders of the newly re-established state were finally demarcated that it was gradually realized that it might take quite a while to get Vilnius back, thus it was necessary to take care of and modernize the temporary capital of Lithuania as the main urban space representing the Republic of Lithuania.¹⁷ Even though over the twenty years of the temporary capital’s existence, quite a number of contemporary houses up to six storeys high were built in Kaunas, as a result of which Kaunas gained some features of a modern and contemporary city, in the conscience of the apprehender of the interwar period Kaunas remained a low-rise and rather horizontal city.¹⁸

This is exactly the kind of Kaunas that Liudas Vasaris, the main character of the novel *Altorių šešėly*, sees upon his return to the temporary capital of the

¹⁷ As of the mid-1920s the administration of the temporary capital started taking care of its economy: in 1924 the installation of a wastewater collection system started, in 1928 the installation of a water supply system started and in 1924 buses and taxis appeared on the streets of Kaunas.

¹⁸ By the 1930s, the temporary capital had changed beyond recognition: miserable low-rise wooden buildings disappeared in the background of modern architecture; new public spaces, squares and parks appeared in the city. The interwar period is justly considered to be one of the most significant periods in the architectural development of Kaunas, because it was then that the distinctive, rational and functional cityscape of the central part of the city was formed.

re-established independent Lithuania after ten long years of wandering abroad.¹⁹ All the main adjectives describing his first impression of the city bear a negative connotation: meagre, shabby, low-rise, full of potholes, dirty, dead, slow, flat, worn-out, grey and miserable. Yet another important highlight to the first impression of Kaunas, in addition to the slow pace of life and poverty that cannot go unnoticed, is its flat and horizontal panorama: the city is depicted as a hole in the ground, as a space that clearly lacks the vertical dimension (“*The lower station, a square full of potholes and a bow-backed cobble street full of skewed wooden slums with leaky roofs that seem to be buried in the ground. [...] The whole town is full of small low-rise houses that are barely rising above the ground, with occasional three-storey buildings peaking here and there to enjoy all that space around them*” [emphasis in italics made by V.Š.] (477)). The downwards orientation of the landscape tells on the observer’s emotions: “His good mood is gone and something grey, boring and sad starts creeping into his heart instead” (477).

Later in the novel, all this flatness of the temporary capital’s architecture, including poverty and dirt as its economic and aesthetic characteristics, is transferred from the empiric into the symbolic level of textual meaning. As the story of the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the “flat” panorama of Kaunas is not only a realistic reflection of the city’s landscape, but also a reference to the trivial, provincial and philistine society of Kaunas, which forms an opposition to the creative nature and individualism of Vasaris, including his attempt to break free. The horizontal axis of the spatial structure of the novel – the urban crowd with its basic instincts, envy, gossip and malice – is contra-positioned to the vertical axis represented by the romantic-symbolic figure of an individual artist whose spiritual level seems to be unattainable for the crowd as if he lived in a high-rise ivory tower.

3.2. CLAUSTROPHOBIC SPACE

Yet another highlight in the image of the temporary capital in addition to its triviality and misery, which continues throughout the entire Part III of the novel like a red thread, is the cramped cityscape of Kaunas, and the suffocating atmosphere of the city. From the first pages of the “Liberation” section, it is continuously emphasized that in Kaunas nobody can go unnoticed or behave as one likes because here everybody is under constant surveillance and assessment, everybody is being gossiped about and controlled. Already during his first night in Kaunas, Vasaris realizes that he will not be able to disappear in the crowd and live the life he used to live abroad (491). With time he develops an ever stronger feeling of being watched and followed. Vasaris refers to the atmosphere in Kaunas as suffocating and compares it to the omnipresent poison of envy and hatred, which kills individuality and subdues determination to undergo radical change (637).

It is the alert community control rather than the misery of the city or the height of its buildings that determines the image of Kaunas as that of an out-of-the-way

¹⁹ Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Raštai* [Writings], vol. 4: *Altorių šešėly* [In the shadow of altars] (Vilnius: Vaga, 1992), 477. Further in the text reference is made to a particular page in the publication.

province instead of a European metropolis as portrayed by Putinas. The most important feature of a big city that is highlighted by all urban researchers is the freedom of an individual from community control. Despite Georg Simmel's antipathy to the overly rationalized, intellectualized and anonymous social relations characteristic of a metropolis, he still admits that these particular features enable the level of freedom that will never be found in a small town. The indifference, anonymity, intellectualization and cosmopolitanism determine the freedom of action and thought that is prevented by the small-mindedness and prejudice characteristic of a small town.²⁰

In terms of community control, the temporary capital is undoubtedly an example of a small town: small numbers of conservative intelligentsia, officials and businessmen lead to constant surveillance and assessment of every single member of the elite by the rest of the community. The cramped spiritual landscape of the temporary capital resulting from strong community control results in Vasaris feeling claustrophobic in the city, and the metaphorically suffocating image of the low-rise Kaunas is gradually transformed into that of a trap.

3.3. TRAP

By Part III of the novel, Vasaris finds himself at a crossroads in life. Over the long years that he spent abroad, Vasaris had already put up with the idea that he has no vocation to be a priest and that by staying a priest he will continuously inhibit his poetic talent, deceiving both himself and others. On his way to Kaunas, Vasaris seems to be almost determined and liberated from his inner dilemmas. Seemingly, all he has to do is take this last step and officially give up his priesthood. However, the moment Vasaris reaches Kaunas, he finds himself in a trap. The priest's spiritual state is symbolically conveyed through the description of his impression from his first night in Kaunas which stems from watching electric poles and wires along the road (477). In his mind, Vasaris sees a horrible vision where electric wires fall down on a passer-by, entangling him and killing him with their high voltage. This vision is a projection of his inner state. From the day Vasaris returned to Lithuania, he found himself tangled in a spider-web of inner spiritual contradictions that was impossible to disentangle himself from (477). His inner struggle between priest and poet, which he seemed to have subdued when in a foreign land, returns with striking force. Both the indecisive and reflective character of Vasaris and the suffocating atmosphere of the city, which hardly enables any radical decision-making, make it impossible for the priest to take the final step leading to liberation.

The philistine society of Kaunas is depicted as a provincial and conservative one, full of deeply rooted clericalism, political hypocrisy and opportunism. As soon as he arrives in the city, Vasaris gets the feeling that Kaunas puts him down to earth, ruins, hobbles and rumples him. In practically no time, the oracular first impression of Kaunas as a flat, dreary, dirty city, including the vision of

²⁰ Georg Simmel, "Großstädte und das Geistesleben," in idem, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908*, vol. 1, ed. by Rüdiger Kramme, Angela Rammstedt, Otthein Rammstedt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 123–26.

the electric wires entangling a passer-by, becomes a reality in the priest's life. Vasaris returned to Lithuania full of firm determination to give up the priesthood. However, as a result of enormous pressure from the surrounding environment (both his parents and his duties at the Catholic gymnasium), he soon gives up on his previous intention. Kaunas society is depicted as morally hypocritical and well disposed towards a double-faced life. The prevailing perception of freedom in one's private life is as liberal as the external demonstration of strict adherence to stringent moral rules is bigoted (536–537). Thus, the spiritual conformism of Vasaris and his inclination to give up on his previous principles seem to be determined by his temper as much as by the overall environment of the temporary capital, which turned hypocrisy into the norm.

As Vasaris gets used to the life in the temporary capital, he starts changing (584). As if trying to adapt to the prevailing horizontal dimension of the city, he gradually withdraws from the high spiritual dimension, gives up on idealism and the principled ethical position and with time gives in to numerous moral compromises, sensuality and hedonism.

3.4. PROFANE CITY

Even though the legend of the founding of Kaunas is present in the chronicles of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, even though the confluence of the rivers Nemunas and Neris was mythologized back in 19th-century Polish literature from where it was later transposed into folklore, the mythical component of the city resulting from the previous centuries remained (intentionally or unintentionally) unnoticed during the independence period and was in no way reflected upon. The temporary capital depicted in the novel by Putinas, as well as throughout the literature of the interwar period, contains no historical dimension or any mythical or legendary substrate. It is free from any literary or folkloric urban inter-text or anything of what Toporov refers to as the spiritual-cultural area of the urban text substrate.

The lack of the mythical dimension becomes ever more evident when comparing images of the historical and the temporary capitals of Lithuania, which keep competing in the cultural consciousness of the interwar society. This is clearly evident in Putinas's novel too. Thus, it is worth comparing the scene where Vasaris arrives in Kaunas with the trip of fellow seminary students to the historical capitals of Vilnius and Trakai described in Part I (Chapter IX) of the novel *Altoriaų šešėly*. Even before arriving in Vilnius, in his mind Vasaris clearly identifies the city with a symbolic space and his imagination draws a picture of a mythologized Vilnius formed by a cultural tradition (150). Since the first steps along the streets of Vilnius, the historical capital reveals itself to the fellow-travelers as a mythical space that fills them with a multitude of mystical experiences and surrounds them with a legendary spirit. During their trip to Vilnius, the fellow seminary students follow the sacral topography of the city and from the train station go directly to the Gates of Dawn. The miraculous site fills the travelers with mystical respect and awe, and reminds them of the urban folklore story where some passers-by who failed to pay due respect to the Mother of God faced God's wrath (153). At the same time, the relationship of the literary subject with Vilnius is both pious

(“they drove back feeling like pilgrims returning from a holy place, where they paid respects to the ruins of the past and established a tight connection with the tradition”; 157) and intimate (the capital is intuitively perceived and experienced as something of one’s own kin and as a space close to one’s heart; 155).

In Part III of the novel, Vasaris, who is already on his way to Kaunas, does not see any connection between the city and a preconceived image in his mind or any symbolic landmark. Unlike Vilnius, Kaunas does not invoke any patriotic feelings in him (but rather on the contrary, it lessens the enthusiasm to work for the sake of the free homeland, which was rather strong when Vasaris was still on his way to Lithuania), does not relate to any national historical tradition nor does it entail any mythical or sacral dimension. From the very first moments in Kaunas, Vasaris feels like a stranger and in the foreword to Part III of the novel he is often ostentatiously referred to as a stranger.

Certainly, such a contrast between the images of Vilnius and Kaunas in the novel *Altorių šešėly* has been in part determined by differences in the purpose of the character’s travels, including his cultural and life experience. The seminary student was going to Vilnius with the aim of getting to know the city that he was about to see for the first time in his life, whereas when Vasaris returned to Kaunas already as a Doctor of Philosophy, he had already spent ten long years in various cities of Russia and Western Europe. Despite all these circumstances, one can claim that in the novel the historical and the temporary capitals are depicted as two opposing extremities on the value chain. The spatial structure of the text further strengthens this opposition between the low-rise, flat city and the high-rise city which was founded on a hill (first and foremost Vilnius emerges in the mind of Vasaris in the form of Gediminas Hill, from the top of which he admires the city and the surrounding areas and experiences a mystical connection with his nation and its history; 155). When assessing the image of Vilnius in the novel, it is worth noting that even though the plot of Part I of the novel takes us back to the times before World War I, the novel itself was written in 1931, when the image of Vilnius in Lithuanian culture was that of a city that remained on the other side of the demarcation line and was sacralized more than ever before.

For ages, Vilnius was a highly sacralized *locus* of Lithuania, a place of miracles enabled by Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn as well as the Kalvarijos replicating the Via Dolorosa of Christ and the Hill of Three Crosses as the embodiment of Christian martyrdom. The interwar society of Lithuania perceived the political loss of the historical capital as a collective grievance, which strongly activated the perception of its symbolic importance for Lithuanian culture, including its public and national identity and integration into public, intellectual, artistic and other types of discourse of the interwar period. In the context of the contemporary Lithuanian culture, Vilnius was perceived as part of a pure myth because only very few citizens of independent Lithuania had ever lived or even been to the city. In the collective memory, it was embedded as a multitude of historical and sacral symbols and existed as an ephemeral city of dreams.

Although the historical capital played an important role in the formation of the national consciousness for many years, during the interwar period its symbolic importance grew ever more. It turned into a romanticized ideal, a slogan of independence and an object of patriotic cult. Even a separate genre of patriotic poetry appeared in literature, which was referred to as poems about Vilnius. With

time, some of them were transformed into songs, marches and hymns. From the day Vilnius was lost, its connection with the spiritual revival of the nation grew ever stronger in the consciousness of Lithuanian society: the loss of the capital was perceived not only as a political loss, but also as a homelessness of the whole nation – without Vilnius the nation will forever remain spiritually incomplete.

The image of Kaunas in the cultural consciousness of the interwar period emerged as a mythologized antipode of Vilnius. The status of a temporary capital bore the connotation of ersatz, uncertainty, and insufficiency. The image of an ignoramus temporary capital in the interwar literature that was only beginning to realize the contemporary city space as a new dimension of experience had to do with the disappointment of the intelligentsia of the 1920s and 1930s with the actual reality of the time. There Kaunas is reflected as a cradle of the Lithuanian bourgeois and a stage for it to flourish, as a representation of its social capitalist flaws and the core of the nation's spiritual crisis.²¹ In addition to the annoyance about the loss of Vilnius, there was also a disappointment with the first difficult years of life in independent Lithuania, including the growing social disparities and economic differences between the better-off urban inhabitants and the backward-looking rural population. This makes it clear why in the collective conscience of the interwar period the temporary capital was perceived as the source of all social and spiritual evil, as if the city in its nature was programmed to be soulless, mercantile and self-seeking.

3.5. BABYLON

In the novel *Altorių šešėly*, the temporary capital is metonymically represented by Mrs. Liucija Gladžiuvienė and her modern and comfortable salon, the material abundance of which highlights its spiritual misery. Just like the image of Kaunas presented in the novel, Gladžiuvienė lacks a spiritual vertical axis. Her image is overly sensual and eroticized with occasional highlights characteristic of a *femme fatale* which was so popular in the interwar period.

Even though deep down in his heart, Vasaris despises the comfort of the salons frequented by the intelligentsia of Kaunas, including the characteristic abuse of various pleasures, he appears to be incapable of resisting Gladžiuvienė's erotic charms. The power that Liucija has over Vasaris is in multiple places compared to that of drugs, poison and even magic. Enchanted by Liucija's closeness and availability, her erotic clothes and seductive body, Vasaris enjoys the resulting spiritual wilt: his inner dilemmas are subdued by the hedonistic atmosphere of the Gladžiuvienė salon, whereas his previous spiritual aspirations and his rebellious stance fade away (583).

When in a suitable environment, Gladžiuvienė's inborn vitality bursts out in a hedonistic spree. The temporary capital, like the biblical Babylon, teems with an abundance of temptations. The hedonistic environment of Gladžiuvienė's salon

²¹ Based on Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas' *Krizė* [Crisis] (1937), Juozas Grušas' *Karjeristai* [Careerists] (1935), Jonas Marcinkevičius' *Jis turi mirti* [He must die] (1937), Antanas Venclova's *Draugystė* [Friendship] (1936), and Petras Vaičiūnas' dramas *Patriotai* [Patriots] (1926) and *Tikruoju keliu* [Following the true path] (1933), etc.

is extremely maleficent to Vasaris, whereas Glaudžiuvienė herself is depicted as morbidly dependent on urban entertainment. Liucija fails to find happiness in her married life and dives into the world of pleasures offered by the temporary capital. Her whole life seems like a never-ending party: it twirls around in the rhythm of the foxtrot and intoxicates like drugs (611).

The side of urban life that results in psychological dependence was a rather popular topic in interwar Lithuania. It was vastly exploited both in publicist and literary discourse. Undoubtedly, this was provoked by the actual social reality: after the turmoil of World War I and fights for independence subsided, the emerging Lithuanian urban society plunged into the pleasures of life that until then were inaccessible to them. In the interwar period, the temporary capital, just like all other big cities in Western Europe, witnessed the arrival of the era of mass entertainment and the culture of pleasures.

Part III of the novel *Altorių šešėly* was not the only literary piece that expressed concern over changes in the social life of Lithuania in the 1920s: the whole literary reflection characteristic of interwar Kaunas did so too. It was no accident that Putinas chose to talk about the spiritual crisis resulting from modern urban life through telling the story of life of a female urban dweller. The life of the lady from Kaunas was determined by the social changes of the 1920s. It seemed to reveal the essence of the varied life and became its quintessence and metonymy. In the eyes of contemporaries, the fate of women in the temporary capital that was becoming ever more modern became a source of numerous interesting plots and thus overshadowed a number of other interesting subjects in literary works about Kaunas.²²

3.6. TRIAL

The compositional axis of the novel *Altorių šešėly* by Putinas – the story of Vasaris's spiritual maturity, including his search for identity and his own story of individuation – could be perceived as an archetypical variation on the topic of a journey. In this particular case, the journey is perceived as a story about individual consciousness and a subject's movement in the direction of their own identity, including the integrity of their own Self,²³ and the destination is a place where inner harmony and neutralization of spiritual conflicts is only possible on condition that pivotal decisions are taken and personal integrity is not sacrificed in order to abide by the collective conventions.

²² The life of ladies from Kaunas was depicted in the novel *Krizė* [Crisis] by Putinas, *Karjeristai* [Careerists] by Juozas Grušas, *Ministeris* [Minister] by Antanas Vienuolis (1935), *Ministerijos Rožė* [The Rose of the Ministry] by Teofilis Tilvytis (1931), *Laisvės alėja* [Alley of Freedom] (1935) by Juozas Visginas (real name – Juozas Geniušas), poems “Dirbtinės gėlės” [Artificial flowers] and “Žaliasis kaimas” [Green village] (both dating back to 1938) by Antanas Miškinis, short stories by Vytautas Alantas, etc.

²³ Toporov finds numerous variations on the mythologeme of a journey in biographic novel, Bildungsroman and works representing other epic genres. The analogue of the journey of the main character of mythical stories in the works of the said genres coincides with the programme of the life journey of the subject. (Топоров, “Пространство и текст,” 271.)

In Part III of the novel, after long wanderings Vasaris finally returns to the temporary capital of Lithuania as a character whose final destination seems to be within arm's reach, but who at the same time finds himself at a pivotal crossroads. Having reached this climactic point, he is forced to go through a number of dangerous trials, such as the power of public opinion formed by Kaunas society, which is highly conservative, reactive and prone to moral conventionalism, and the sinister allure of Liucija Glaudžiuvienė who plays a fateful role in the life of Vasaris. Just like in the plot of the mythical journey, where the main character proves to be worth reaching his final destination by overcoming a fateful obstacle (e.g. by killing a dragon in a fairy tale), Vasaris must resist the collective power of society which is repressing individual freedom and break free from the erotic spell of Liucija in order to escape from the spiritually suffocating and morally frustrating environment of Kaunas and reach his final destination, which is personal integrity.

The mythological interpretation of the plot of the novel is suggested by the stylistic break of Chapter XVI where a mystical vision of a metropolitan demon unexpectedly appears amidst the otherwise realistic plot of the novel. The panorama of Kaunas by night is used as an introduction to the vision. After much delay, Vasaris finally breaks up with Liucija and crosses a bridge over the Nemunas river to reach the Aleksotas slope overlooking the Old Town of Kaunas, which lies in the valley at the confluence of two rivers and emerges before the eyes of the main character as a hollow covered in deep dark shadows (614). Just like in the description of the first impression of the city, the panorama of Kaunas by night lacks the vertical dimension, which is strongly emphasized in the description (614). Further in the text, the author establishes a clear connection between the horizontal dimension of the panorama and the ethical characteristics of Kaunas: the city situated on the confluence of two rivers emerges as the lair of the metropolitan civilization demon.

The metaphysical vision experienced by Vasaris transforms the quiet panorama of the city by night into a demonic vision where Liucija is depicted as a victim of urban civilization which loosens moral norms and drags an individual deep down into the raving of vital forces: "He had seen many big cities in his previous life, had gotten to know their life well and had felt their mood. Compared to those other cities, Kaunas seemed to be a small and shabby provincial town that could only be found in a country of meagre resources. Now he felt that the demon of urban civilization started sharpening its nails and reaching for Kaunas. The demon preys on innocent victims, plenty of wasted efforts, plenty of rejected sacrifice, plenty of broken hearts and shattered ideals. That night it occurred to Liudas Vasaris [...] that Liucija Glaudžiuvienė must be one such victim of urban civilization. It was then that he suddenly realized that the demon is turning his fiery eyes on him too and aiming for his heart with its burning nails. Vasaris understood that he must remain vigilant by going through the process of constant renewal and hard work in order to escape the fate of becoming a soulless lump and suffocating in the stifling, crammed and dusty vale of Kaunas" (614–5).

The anti-urban pathos of the passage clearly correlates with the tradition to demonize big cities, which was characteristic of the Western philosophical, sociological and literary discourse of the turn of the 20th century. To tell the truth, Emile Verhaeren, Rainer Maria Rilke, German naturalists and expressionists who

entrenched the demon-like images of the city in Western urban poetry, were mostly focusing on social threats posed by a big city and depicted crowds of workers who perish in the grip of a giant octopus-like megapolis, whereas Putinas sees metropolitan civilization as something that destroys spirituality, and that turns an individual into a hollow shell, a puppet that is manipulated by senses, lust and pleasures. In the eyes of Vasaris, spiritual vigilance, renewal and hard work function as an antidote to the destructive power of the city. It is vigilance that helps Vasaris avoid the deadly trap on his spiritual way to freedom, whereas Toporov considers vigilance to be one of the most important conditions enabling the mythical character to overcome obstacles that they meet on their way.²⁴

In summary, it can be said that in his novel *Altorių šešėly* Putinas creates the dimension of symbolic images of interwar Kaunas based on the landscape and architectural substrata of the city. The city of Kaunas with its specific low-rise architecture squeezed in the valley between two confluent rivers appears to be a spiritually suffocating space that lacks the sacral vertical dimension. The opposition *low vs high* gains a multitude of axiological meanings and structures the artistic dimension of the literary work. The philistines of the city with their base instincts, envy, gossip, hypocrisy and moral conventionalism are pushed to the lower stratum. The modern urban civilization, which loosens moral norms, eliminates the spiritual foundation and nestles cozily in the “stifling, crammed and dusty vale of Kaunas,” brings individuals even further down. To escape this deadly pitfall, the subject of the novel settles up in the higher dimension by distancing himself from the actual environment of the temporary capital and limiting himself to his inner spiritual world and creative endeavors.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the interwar Lithuanian literature, we will find no signs of a historical reflection on the city of Kaunas. The emerging Lithuanian urban society itself originated from rural areas and was rather uninterested in the previous history and culture of Kaunas created by “strangers.” The impression is that in the collective consciousness of the new residents of Kaunas, the city functioned as a world that was born alongside with Lithuania’s independence and the new status of the temporary capital city.

Throughout the period, any historical reflections on Kaunas were overshadowed by topical societal changes that were happening during the interwar period. The resulting social criticism was determined by the expectations stemming from the historical and political situation. Many counted on Kaunas as it had to replace Vilnius and to fulfill the ideal of a national capital city. This is why all of its flaws – social contradictions characteristic of urban life, clashes between agrarian and modern consumerist culture, the devaluation of traditional values – were received with a lot of criticism both in public and literary discourse.

²⁴ Ibidem, 264.

As long as social criticism of the temporary capital in the field of literature stayed within the limits of publicist satire mocking topicalities of the day, the process of mythologization was non-existent. However, in the early 1930s the network of symbolic images of the city in the intensifying literary reflections on Kaunas grew tighter, the arch plot and character types of the temporary capital became more vivid and the contour of the temporary capital myth emerged. Gradually, public and cultural issues of the temporary capital and the whole of interwar Lithuania grew into a mythologized story about a pernicious city which becomes a fatal trial on the life path of an individual who is in search of his identity.

Many novels and poems of the 1920s–1930s about Kaunas share the same plot – a story of an archetypal journey that is full of various trials.²⁵ In the life path of literary subjects searching for their own identity, the temporary capital appears like a trap that can only be escaped by morally resilient and spiritually strong characters. All those who fail the fatal trial, i.e. surrender to the various temptations offered by the city, such as a life full of luxury, pleasures and gaiety, give in to the lust of power and fame, become hedonists, careerists, political demagogues, gamblers and criminals. No matter what fate awaits them – be it a successful career in public institutions or a prison cell – all of them are punished by spiritual death.

As the literary arch plot of the temporary capital unfolds, only those who boast the strongest spiritual ideals and system of values manage to preserve their inner identity. All those literary subjects who successfully overcome all dangers of the temporary capital forever remain outsiders watching the masquerade of life in Kaunas from a distance. Often by the end of a literary work such characters leave the city and return back to their village or move to live in a country estate, whereas others develop resistance to the “poison” of the city as a result of the numerous trials that harden them: the obstacles that they managed to overcome help them to find themselves and the surrounding world anew and to develop a new system of values.

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²⁵ For comparison, *Draugystė* [Friendship] by Antanas Venclova, *Patriotai* [Patriots] by Petras Vaičiūnas, *Jis turi mirti* [He must die] and *Raudonos Kauno naktys* [The red nights of Kaunas] (1932) by Jonas Marcinkevičius, *Krizė* [Crisis] by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, “Dirbtinės gėlės” [Artificial flowers] and “Žalioji kaimas” [Green village] by Antanas Miškinis, *Karjeristai* [Careerists] by Juozas Grušas, *Laisvės alėja* [Alley of freedom] by Juozas Visginas, *Ministerijos Rožė* [The Rose of the Ministry] and a satirical poem “Dičius” (1934) by Teofilis Tilvytis, etc.

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MYTHOLOGIZATION OF KAUNAS IN THE LITHUANIAN LITERATURE OF THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Summary

The article analyzes the mythologization of Kaunas, the temporary capital of Lithuania, in the Lithuanian literature of the interwar period. The methodological approach of the research is based on the research methods of urban mythopoetics by Vladimir Toporov and that of topological semiotics by Algirdas Julien Greimas.

Due to objective historical and social circumstances, the formation of the Lithuanian urban literature started only at the beginning of the 20th century. The intensive period in the urbanization of the Lithuanian literature was that of the interwar period when literary reflections on Kaunas started gaining certain dominant symbolic images of the city, repeating plots and characters typical of Kaunas. The literary myth of the temporary capital as a pernicious city which becomes a moral trial for an individual is revealed in the article through the analysis of Part III of the novel *Altorių šešėly* [In the shadows of altars] by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, the most prominent Lithuanian novelist of the interwar period.

Adj. Izabela Ślusarek