

# THE TEMPORARY CAPITAL IN LITHUANIAN LITERATURE

## Summary

The object of this study is the temporary capital of Lithuania – not the historical Kaunas of the interwar period, but its literary counterpart created in accordance with the distinctive principles of the world of art. Literature not only captures the specific characteristics of the city's reality, but also encompasses the relations of individual and collective consciousness with a particular urban space of a particular period. Therefore, literature allows the reader a glimpse at the temporary capital through the eyes of its contemporaries – writers who were forced to either become post-war émigrés or live under Soviet rule, whereas to the literary historian it provides the materials needed to reconstruct the development of the literary image of interwar Kaunas.

One of the main methodological backings of this study is the concept of the Petersburg text developed by Vladimir Toporov of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics. Following Toporov's example, this study focuses on those works of literature that not only reflect the empirics and realities of the temporary capital, but also reveal the mythopoetic interpretation of the city. In them, empiric reality gives way to a historiosophical summary that conveys the very essence and uniqueness of the city.

Even though Toporov's methodological instruments for analysing the literary city are, in many aspects, useful when examining the temporary capital in Lithuanian literature, they cannot be used

without reservations as it was created with Petersburg in mind and heeds the specifics of the city's founding and historical development. During the two interwar decades, the temporary capital was not only a political, economic and cultural centre, but also the *only* Lithuanian city. Thus the interwar literary myth was generated not only by the semantic substrate formed by the city's characteristics, but also by the overlap between urban and provincial culture that became apparent in the 1930s. In some interwar texts, especially in poetry, the temporary capital is presented without the specific semantic characteristics of Kaunas. It is mythologized or, more often, demonized, as an anonymous modern urban space which opposes the province. Even though these texts are devoid of clear toponymic references, biographic and cultural contexts help the reader recognize the temporary capital. In order to reflect this aspect of the mythologization of interwar Kaunas, along with the method of the analysis of the literary city expanded by Toporov, the study employs the strategy of analysis of topological models of culture created by Yuri Lotman.

Other notable methodological sources of this study are the theoretical conceptions and assumptions on historical memory formulated in the works of the German literary historian Aleida Assmann. In the analysis of texts that are historically distant from the period of the temporary capital, her conceptions and assumptions are combined with the method of the study of mythopoetic expression of the literary city expanded by Toporov.

The monograph is the first systematic study of the literary temporary capital. Its aims are two-fold: to determine the interwar myth-creation tendencies caused by specific historical circumstances of literary Kaunas, and to track the shifts in reflection on the temporary capital in Lithuanian literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These shifts were brought about by changes in the historical, political, social and cultural situation. The aims of the monograph are achieved by

- researching the semantic substrate which generates a mythical narrative of the temporary capital in specific historical circumstances;
- analysing what worldview, collective self-awareness and/or condition of historical memory are revealed by the symbols used to create the literary myth of the temporary capital;
- evaluating the image of the temporary capital as seen in literary works of specific periods in the historical context of mythologized literary cities. That is to say, the nature of this image is defined in terms of the evolving tradition.

The monograph is structured chronologically. Analysis of some aspects of the myth of the temporary capital that formed in interwar literature is followed by an analysis of the characteristics of literary creation of the myths of interwar Kaunas in émigré literature, the literatures of the Soviet period and of the present day.

There is no sign of historical reflection on Kaunas in Lithuanian interwar literature. Having originated from the village and still in the process of establishment, the Lithuanian urban society was not interested in the history and culture of Kaunas as they had been created by ‘strangers’. It seems that in the collective consciousness of the new settlers of Kaunas, the city’s function was that of a world born together with independence and the status of temporary capital. At that time historical reflections on Kaunas were of lesser relevance than the interwar changes in society. Great expectations, which were dictated by the historical-political situation, facilitated the emergence of social criticism as high hopes were invested in Kaunas: it was to be a substitute for Vilnius and to conform to the envisioned ideal of a capital city. Therefore its shortcomings, like the contradictions within the city’s social life, the conflict of agrarian and consumerist cultures and the devaluation of traditional values, were harshly criticized in both public and literary discourse. While social criticism of the temporary capital was expressed in the form of journalistic satire that mocked issues relevant at the time (as seen in poems like *Kai Kam* (For

Someone) and *Laikinosios sostinės skerdyklai* (To the Slaughterhouse of the Temporary Capital) by Maironis), myth-creation had not yet emerged. In the junction of the 1920s and 1930s, however, it becomes possible to make out the outline of the mythical literary temporary capital, as it was at this time that the archplot and archetypes of the temporary capital emerged, while the imagery used to create literary reflections on Kaunas was rich with symbolism. Little by little, the social and cultural problems faced by the temporary capital, and interwar Lithuania on the whole, acquired the dimension of a mythologized tale of a pernicious City – one that stands in the path of the individual as a fateful challenge to be overcome in the search of identity. The social environment of the swiftly-modernizing interwar Kaunas was shown as a swamp-like trap that draws the literary hero in. The cause for such symbolic imagery was the tendency to contrast the reality of the 1920s and 1930s with that of the idealistic period of *Aušra*; to compare the *nouveau riche*, selfish society of the temporary capital and its lack of moral integrity with single-minded dedication to the nation and the country typical of public figures of the national revival. During the period of independence, in the area of semantics the temporary capital embodied the idea of downfall or decline, its values appeared compromised and ruined, as opposed to those of the village. To the interwar intelligentsia of rural origin, the province represented a lost paradise of traditional values and ethnic roots. To create a corresponding literary image of interwar Kaunas, the topographic sphere of the city's semantic substrate is invoked: situated in a valley and surrounded by steep slopes, the central part of Kaunas becomes a symbolic descent or abyss.

In post-1940 Lithuanian literature written by the émigrés the myth-creation of interwar Kaunas changed direction. As the mist of historical realities cleared and the tendency to mythologize became more pronounced, the social-cultural clashes of the independence period faded into the background and the narrative of the temporary capital became fatefully entwined with the destiny of the country it

represented. After World War II, once Kaunas had lost the status of a cultural, economic, political and social epicentre, the writings of emigrants for the first time pictured the temporary capital as an inner space of artistic worldview, an *axis mundi*, the eternal city. Since Kaunas' time as the temporary capital coincided with the two decades of Lithuanian independence, interwar Kaunas became an icon of the Republic of Lithuania and a metonym of its space-time in the collective consciousness of the émigrés. Having been a metaphor of social and moral crisis for the entire interwar period, in the writings of émigrés the temporary capital assumed the characteristics of a golden age. In retrospect, with the war, the post-war chaos and the nightfall of the occupation in mind, 'the era of Kaunas' was moved to the paradigm of an idealized, irrecoverable past. During this period a sacred vertical establishes itself in the symbolic image of the city: the *genius loci* of Kaunas is 'found' in the locus of Žaliakalnis, rising high above Naujamiestis, while the Church of Christ's Resurrection became the dominant symbol of the cityscape. Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė, Petronėlė Orinaitė and Pulgis Andriušis, all of whom wrote during the exodus period, used the semantic paradigm of spring and topics of youth, morning, sun and resurrection to create the myth of a young, active and ambitious capital, ready to fight for its freedom.

Changes in the symbolic image of the temporary capital, though bound by the topography of the city, reflect a turning point in the myth-creation of interwar Kaunas in the literature of the exodus period. In Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas' *Altorių šešėly* (In the Shadow of Altars) the city, located in a deep valley and encircled by rivers, was linked to a moral ravine in which individuality and creativity are constricted. In the essay *Valstietis nuo Vabalninko* (A Peasant from Vabalninkas) by Orinaitė, however, this same topographic detail becomes a shelter of maternal protection, security and comfort. Transience, which marked the image of interwar Kaunas so fatefully, also adopted a different semantic connotation. During the independence period the status of the temporary capital characterized the surrogate

role of Kaunas; the town was accused of philistinism, profanity and mythogenic helplessness. After 1940, due to the trauma of loss, the transience of the capital of independent Lithuania became a sememe of fragility. Distant in terms of both distance and time, the short-lived era of the temporary capital assumed the image of a delicate spring blossom crushed by the brutal caterpillars of history (Pūkelevičiūtė).

A comparison of myth-creation of the literary temporary capital of the exodus and Soviet periods reveals diverse principles of selection of historic memory: what remained unmentioned or was retouched on this side of the Iron Curtain was on the other side inducted into collective memory as a part of interwar history of Lithuania. Contrary to the idealized narrative of the temporary capital that turned a blind eye on matters of political and social oppositions and was developed by the émigrés, in Soviet Lithuania the memory of interwar Kaunas, along with that of the rest of interwar Lithuania, was ideologically demonized by emphasizing the vices of the bourgeois system and the authoritarian regime. According to Marxist historiography, a bourgeois system based on the exploitation of the working class has no historical prospects and would inevitably be replaced with the more progressive social structure of communism. Respectively, the myth creation of the literary temporary capital relied on an eschatological plot. Interwar Kaunas was depicted as the scene of the collapsing bourgeoisie: a 'mahogany paradise' for the rich, a social hell for the poor. In Soviet times, one of the necessary motifs of 'bourgeois Kaunas' was the heroic portrayal of underground socialists meant to provide a spark of hope in the grim reality of the interwar period. The contradiction of an idealized past (of the national revival) and the moral downfall of the present that generated the myth of the temporary capital during the independence period was replaced with an opposition more suited to the principles of social realism – the dusk of bourgeois Lithuania vs. 'the dawn of socialism'. Constructed in compliance with the compulsory Marxist model of history, the novels of Vytautas Sirijos Gira are a special case in terms of reflection on the

temporary capital in Soviet literature. In them, the author tried to manoeuvre between the notably negative evaluation of independent Lithuania predetermined by political conjuncture and the attempt to return the idea of interwar Kaunas as a unique phenomenon of Lithuanian culture to the collective memory, and to convey the pulse, colour, smell and taste of the city at the time.

In the post-Soviet period the Lithuanian public was faced with the challenge of recreating a historical narrative that would connect the chronologically distant interwar Republic of Lithuania and its legal successor, the state re-established in 1990. The temporary capital as a representation of 'Smetona's Lithuania' became an important place of the collective memory. At the junction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the opposition of the city and the village or the bourgeois and the socialist ideologies became irrelevant to the literary narrative of interwar Kaunas. The contemporary myth of the literary temporary capital is generated by the antagonism between independence and Soviet occupation: the progressive, West-centric culture of interwar Kaunas and a creative breakthrough of the artists and intellectuals of the temporary capital are contrasted with the cultural, intellectual and spiritual stagnation of the totalitarian system.

One may draw the conclusion that historical-political circumstances had a major influence on the tendencies of the mythologization of the temporary capital in Lithuanian literature of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Therefore the literary narrative of interwar Kaunas did not form an integral tradition: the narrative was expanded in diverse directions and belonged to different semantic universes of the interwar period, emigration, Soviet Lithuania, and the reinstated independence.

Translated by Gabija Barnard