

## Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas. *Diaries 1938–1945*

### SUMMARY

Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas was a central figure on the Lithuanian literary scene of the mid-twentieth century. The period of dramatic transformations and cataclysms, when the writer had to reconsider his public images and roles several times, was an important divide in his creative biography. In the most difficult of times, he managed to stay on the stage of the public life; he was never marginalised and never relegated himself to the fringes. Readers are presented with his diary of 1938–1945, which is an exhaustive resource for psychological studies of the stance of the intelligentsia under totalitarianism. In these personal texts, the writer revealed several aspects of his personality: he presented himself as a creator who had accumulated significant symbolic capital and was dissatisfied with himself, a self-demanding scholar, a literary historian, an organiser of academic institutions exploiting his authority, an initiator of the public cultural life in perilous times who had undertaken a huge responsibility, and, finally, as a sensitive citizen reflecting on the fragility of his own existence and concerned for the fate of his entire community.

During the last years of the interwar period, Mykolaitis-Putinas did not feel at home among the increasingly polarised ideological groups, even though he would be invited as an expert and arbitrator to evaluation commissions, would visit ministers' receptions, and perform representational duties at meetings with foreign writers. Always close to the ruling elite, he was sceptical of President Antanas Smetona's attempts to uphold the cult of the 'leader of the nation'. To the colleagues concerned for the prestige of national culture, Prof. Mykolaitis seemed acceptable as a moderate mediator who easily balanced between the left- and right-wing camps that split a large part of the intellectual elite shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.

In 1940–1941, during the first Soviet period, he was most struck by the lack of national self-esteem and systematic contempt for the hard-won state. While

closely observing the civic society of Lithuania, which was degrading itself and destroying its foundations, Mykolaitis-Putinas failed to spot that he himself had succumbed to the regime's methods of influence: he was briefly impressed by the ability of the new regime to effectively trigger the faltering intelligentsia and the promise to crush the shell of spiritual atrophy; most of all, he was pleased by the reunification of the territories inhabited by people of the same ethnos and by the impression that the Lithuanian rules were put in action in the regained Vilnius region. Attempts were made to combine the still-existing patriotic or even aggressively nationalist ambitions of the interwar period with socialist activism. The poet kept feeling that he was the nurturer of the national movement and the cultural canon of the ethnocentric state.

In February 1941, Prof. Mykolaitis was elected member of the newly founded Academy of Sciences and treated this as a fallback in case he had to leave the university. In April 1941, he was appointed director of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature, which was part of the Academy of Sciences. Along the natural desire to secure stable existential foundations, there was also a concern for the protection of the literary heritage. He was in charge of the literary museums in Vilnius and Kaunas, important cultural centres that employed the writers who were awkward for the regime. Mykolaitis assumed responsibility not only for the Institute of Lithuanian Literature, but also for the Academy of Sciences as a whole and was elected vice-chair of this organisation. At the beginning of the Nazi occupation, the prospects of such an institution were put in doubt and it had to be proved that it was not a Soviet ideological tool and that establishments of this kind existed in Germany. When in March 1943 the Nazis closed down many cultural and research institutions and deported Prof. Vladas Jurgutis, the president of the Academy of Sciences, and some other representatives of the academic and administrative elite to the Stutthof concentration camp, Mykolaitis became not a formal but actual head of the Academy of Sciences and regarded this position as a personal misfortune. The changing waves of the occupation convinced the diarist that '[t]he nation must be full-grown and mature not only for independence but also for slavery. Then it will be prepared for eternity' (entry of 28 February 1942). He often thought of the nation in the broader sense suggested by the Catholic philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis.

A resistance posture and overt heroism were not characteristic of Mykolaitis-Putinas; his contemplative character protected him from sudden moves and ill-considered actions. In the summer of 1944, when the news from the front were increasingly disturbing, he left for his wife's native village Gaižiūnai near Va-

balninkas, in northern Lithuania, and spent a few months far from the strategic centres subjected to bombing raids. He was only slightly affected by the invasion of the Red Army and during this period of voluntary isolation he reflected a lot about his position on the stage of history. He considered his epoch to be the time of the triumph of political realism and the compromise of idealism.

Although he received a number of letters in which attempts were made to persuade him to return to Vilnius, which had been 'liberated' by the USSR, and to tempt him with high-ranking posts, the poet dallied: he suspected that he might be persecuted for the anti-Soviet works he had published during the Nazi occupation; he took the news of his apartment in Vilnius being ransacked by the NKVD, who destroyed his entire literary archives, very hard. In his war-time poetic work, Mykolaitis-Putinas expressed catastrophist sentiments that struck a chord with most of his contemporaries. He experienced resistance to totalitarianism as a metaphysical rebellion, which is why for a while, even after he returned to the Soviet-occupied Vilnius, he felt courageous and immune. His decision to return and legalise his existence was driven by the imperative of duty to his own culture: it seemed to him that in post-war Vilnius, each representative of the Lithuanian intelligentsia was important and that any government could be amenable and bearable.

If the diary is to be believed, Mykolaitis-Putinas's duties as a professor at the university caused him psychological torment, perhaps because, being a perfectionist by nature and refusing to make concessions to slow European shifts in national culture, he was constantly facing the dilemma of how to objectively present Lithuanian literature, which, compared to the Western classics, seemed to be provincial and lacking in a philosophical base. According to Mykolaitis-Putinas, Lithuanian writers were wasting their talent not only during the hard times of the ban on the press in the nineteenth century but also during all twenty years of independence and therefore they were also responsible for the cultural backwardness. He even kept asking himself what he had achieved and created. Was he not in danger of bursting like an empty soap bubble, failing to live up to the gift of inspiration given by fate? The writer often confessed to reading foreign classics and recovering somehow, but each time he compared Lithuanian writers with Maxim Gorky, Lord Byron, Henrik Ibsen, or even Armenian writers, who had experienced more trials of history, he felt disappointed. The poet was sensitive to what was dramatic, monumental, and historically significant. His aesthetic views were conservative neoclassical, and during the war he easily found a common language with Jonas Grinius and

Bernardas Brazdžionis, with the intelligentsia of the Catholic worldview from whom he had distanced himself during the interwar years.

The professor had a special relationship with the 'earth' poets, the pupils of the gymnasiums of independent Lithuania for whom he was an undisputed authority and a classic. Many students of that time remember the literary afternoons that took place in the lecture rooms of Vilnius University between 1940 and 1943. Even after the university was closed, young poets used to gather at Putinas's home: attempts were made to continue informal studies, the professor signed grades retroactively, and assessed papers. For him, such a semi-academic format of self-education was a way of breaking through the information blockade; for the students, it was an attempt to escape, if only for a short time, the gloomy atmosphere of the occupation.

Mykolaitis-Putinas felt obliged to intercede on behalf of the Lithuanian cultural elite who were ruthlessly repressed by the occupiers (he was especially concerned for the fate of his colleague Balys Sruoga, who had been repressed by the Nazis), even though he was also in real danger during the time of terror. This period was important for him as a creator: he spoke in a dramatic tone in his symbolic ballads, the territory of inner conflicts began to emerge in his poetry, he came close to the modernist poetics of the absurd and gave impetus to the existentialist reflection developed by the younger generation of the *Žemininkai* poets. In the human sense, the poet felt very lonely, although he had loyal and devoted students. He knew how to appreciate what he saw, heard, and felt: he especially admired classical music and the contrasts of nature. He rediscovered the environs of Vilnius and took an interest both in the architecture of the Old Town and in the picturesque suburbs of the city.

The writer's diary does not purport to be an encyclopaedia of the era or an intimate confession, although to the reader, the personality of the poet will very likely unfold from a perspective not yet seen, fairly close, and personal. This diary makes it obvious why Mykolaitis-Putinas never became a Soviet writer. According to Vytautas Kubilius, many of those who knew the poet saw him standing 'on the shore of that other epoch', as if staying behind in the lost Arcadia of the interwar period, in the refuge of Romantic poetry and Beethoven's symphonies.