

The Crafting Man: The Poetic Anthropology of Marcelijus Martinaitis

Summary

This book presents one possible interpretation of and an insight into the work of Marcelijus Martinaitis (1936–2013), one of the most famous and significant Lithuanian poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this monograph, I read and interpreted Martinaitis's poetry, essays, and journalism, along with his other community work. I included his interest in folklore and ethnic culture, his work with the monument protection movement, his interest in the traditional art of etching patterns on Easter eggs and woodwork, and his decision to transport his parents' home from a Samogitian village that had undergone land development, to a farmstead near Vilnius, where it was restored to its authentic form. I see all these interests as expressions of Martinaitis's multifaceted creativity. According to anthropologists, creativity is the universal way humans make unique sense of their environment and their own authentic existence. Therefore, creativity is typical of every individual and manifests itself in all areas of their life, regardless of whether it manifests itself as unforgettable works of art or is left hidden in private moments of personal experience. Thus, even though the study of creativity is most accessible through the work of artists, its foremost function is to reveal the interpersonal aspects of life and the picture of a specific historical society.

For an integral analysis of Martinaitis's work, I chose the theory and method of literary anthropology. As hinted in the title, the word 'anthropology' is especially important in this monograph. Anthropology is the study of the individual within culture: the individual engages in culture both by creating and by being shaped by culture as such. It explores all that is human: the behaviours and practices of individuals and communities, relationship models, and community structures; how (and why) people lived in different eras.

In this monograph, the concept of anthropology is useful on several levels. On the one hand, I use anthropology as a method for studying literature (literary anthropology); on the other, from the perspective of the object of this study, anthropology serves as a conceptual metaphor that helped me in understanding and explaining Martinaitis's creative position, which I refer to as his poetic anthropology.

An anthropological approach allows two spheres (the creative and the social) to connect into a cohesive cultural text. In my writing, I try to follow the literary footsteps of Martinaitis's creativity from the very beginning of his artistic path and to reconstruct his creative intentions by analysing his writings, in particular his poetry. I attempt to describe what he, as the subject of aesthetic activity, does in his creative world, what his goals are, and what they tell about the times he lived in, coinciding first with the Soviet occupation and then with maturing of an independent society.

Martinaitis grew up in post-war Lithuania and experienced the decline of traditional agrarian culture, as well as the construction of a modern, almost futuristic, world spurred by Soviet ideology. Instead of identifying with the paradigms of either of these two lifestyles or identities, Martinaitis resolves to be an intermediary: a witness of the signs of archaic cultures and their re-interpreter for the contemporary world. What Martinaitis does in his artistic world can resemble gathering up the rubble left in the wake of a disaster and trying to create a more or less tidy image out of it. He knows it is only an imitation, a naïve self-deceit, but it is also a metonymy of the destroyed world, which was lost so suddenly and unexpectedly, without the chance of properly saying goodbye or inheriting it with dignity.

As we know from mythology and various tales of exile, the banished or displaced individual cannot continue existing as usual; instead, they must create a new sense of selfhood, environment, and identity. Cultural scholars note that the twentieth century is brimming with the feeling of 'placelessness', with people forced to construct a selfhood from the intertwined elements of various traditions. This image captures the meaning of post-modern ethnography: it is composing a mosaic of traditions, creating a collage from older cultural signs and thus giving a new meaning to them, re-designing culture, and reinterpreting former interpretations. Having left the archaic agrarian world, the subject of Martinaitis's writings is establishing himself in an urban environment as both an informant of their original worldview and as an interpreter. The informant, interpreter, and participant-observer are all anthropological terms. The informant, or mediator, is the representative of the culture in question; it is the individual who can explain their own culture to the anthropologist; the participant-observer, or the interpreter, is the anthropologist who spends a certain length of time in the culture they study, immersing themselves into the life of the local community, observing the culture while simultaneously existing as (or trying to become) a part of it. A juxtaposition of the symbolism in Martinaitis's various creative works and in his life as an artist reveals his creative position as a mediator or an anthropologist.

Therefore, poetic anthropology is an analytic metaphor derived from an analysis of the creative intentions of Martinaitis's works. According to Wolfgang Iser, the intention of the text is not the author's 'goals and beliefs' but the 'behaviour' of the text itself and the meanings created from textual elements and their interactions: what elements of reality have found their way into the text? How are those elements arranged and what meanings do they create? In other words, what does the text 'do'? I use the hermeneutical meaning of the term 'text' as defined by interpretive anthropologists: according to Paul Ricoeur's theory of discourse, non-literary action (behaviour, languages, beliefs, oral tradition, rituals, etc.) gains potential meaning once written. Thus, a text is not just a work of literature, but also the captured, witnessed (described, filmed, etc.) action or gesture. For

example, Martinaitis's hobby of etching patterns on Easter eggs is also a text open to interpretation and capable of expanding or clarifying the meanings created in his other texts, like his poetry. In this monograph, I juxtapose the different planes of Martinaitis's artistic outlets, because creativity is as much a social phenomenon as it is artistic.

Anthropologists say that creativity has pervaded all the realms of human activity and various moments of human life. The sociologist Vytautas Kavolis defines creativity as the fundamental human condition: essentially, creativity is what makes us human. Clifford Geertz would certainly add that creativity, like culture, is natural and 'public because meaning is'. Indeed, different cultural communities make use of the same assortment of cultural meanings, thus, creativity is also a democratic trait which can emerge in the most unexpected situations of everyday life and in its most intimate moments. Provided they both belong to a shared 'cultural imagination' (Geertz), domestic wit and classic works of literature are connected by a disposition towards creativity, as culture encompasses both words and actions, which are always signs in culture. Even though poetic anthropology is Martinaitis's artistic choice, it cannot be isolated from its social environment. Creativity is social by nature, due to it being 'charged', in the words of Greenblatt, with 'social energy'. Greenblatt uses the term 'social energy' to describe the power of text, words and images to 'shift one's consciousness' and to cause and control collective physical and mental experiences. The effect of a textual experience creates the illusion of real life, which is then recognised, century after century, by new generations of readers.

It is notable that poetic anthropology was most apparent in the works Martinaitis wrote during the Soviet occupation. Roughly at the time of *Sąjūdis* (the Reform Movement of Lithuania), the poetics and functions of his work shifted, and gradually he moved to a different discourse (from poetry to prose). Along with the change in the genre, his creative position and type of creativity also changed. Apparently, the sociohistorical situation of the twentieth century and the brutal politics of the totalitarian regime inspired certain creative intentions. This means that Martinaitis's poetic anthropology can be seen as a phenomenon created by particular circumstances of time and place.

Simultaneously, his creative project, his poetic anthropology, also influenced the sociocultural context of the Soviet era in Lithuania.

In my attempt to examine the multifaceted human experience as it appears in Martinaitis's work, I used concepts from a variety of different discourses: literary theory, anthropology, philosophy, and ethnography, in particular, the works of James Clifford, Hannah Arendt, Agata Bielik-Robson, and Leonidas Donskis. I hope that this interdisciplinary examination of poetry will make at least a humble contribution to the study of Lithuanian literature, culture, and general mentality in the second half of the twentieth century.

The aim of this book is not only to analyse the creative output of Martinaitis, but also to provide a broad introduction of the theory and method of literary anthropology into the discourse on Lithuanian literature. Therefore, the book consists of two parts that are not explicitly separated: the first part of the book is actually its first chapter (which is the most removed from the actual subject of the study as it introduces the intersectional academic discipline of literary anthropology and its history) and the second part comprises the remaining chapters, which are devoted to Martinaitis's work.

In the first chapter, 'Why Anthropology', I give a concise introduction to the two academic disciplines and their development and point out the areas where they overlap and where they maintain their own distinctive intellectual foundations. In the second half of the twentieth-century, contemporary tendencies of genre-mixing influenced anthropologists and they started writing their ethnographic narratives as literary essays and even poetry. In about 1960, American anthropologists began popularising experimental anthropological practices like ethnopoetics, literary anthropology, and anthropological poetry. Anthropologists made use of the ability of the fictional text to convey a worldview from the perspective of the experiencing character. In other words, the 'dogma' of the lyrical subject, as it appears in literary studies, provides the anthropologists with the opportunity to 'enter' the artistic worldview and examine it from the inside.

However, it was not just the social sciences, but also literary studies that underwent some changes. During the second half of the twentieth century, postmodernist tendencies became more prevalent and

literary scholars, who had concerned themselves with classical texts heretofore, turned their attention to more 'marginalised' areas and to the texts that were not traditionally considered 'literature': oral narratives, rituals, advertisements, popular music, fashion, and social behaviours. New historicism, a new form of literary theory that can be seen as a one of the main methodological approaches of literary anthropology, emerged. It aims at grasping the ties between literary texts and historical, political, social, and even emotional reality. Meanwhile, Wolfgang Iser's literary anthropology suggests specific analytical tools for exploring the literary worldview and the process of perception it while reading. Anthropological study of literature also benefits from Mikhail Bakhtin's works on aesthetics and his analytical terms: author, aesthetical subject, hero.

In the second chapter, 'Poetic Anthropology as a Creative Self-Interpretation', I explain the role of anthropology as an analytic term in analysing Martinaitis's multifaceted creativity during the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. In this chapter, I present Martinaitis's biography and the 'duality' of his literary debut. Martinaitis started publishing his poetry in newspapers and magazines in 1955, and his first book came out in 1962. However, Martinaitis considered his second book, published in 1966, to be his debut – the poetry from the actual first book was not included in later anthologies. It is in the second book that a significant shift in his poetics and worldview can be perceived. It was also the time when Martinaitis's so-called poetic anthropology began. Although he did not use this term himself in 2002, when looking retrospectively at his poetry of the Soviet period, he applied another metaphor, that of 'poetic utopia'. Building on the essay by the political philosopher Leonidas Donskis, I reflect on the implied meaning of this metaphor.

In the next three chapters of the book, I conduct an integral study into Martinaitis's creative output. In the chapter 'The Crafting of Culture', I overview the dynamics of his poetics and discuss the prominent motifs of his artistic worldview. One of the main motifs is woodcrafting, which is represented directly, metaphorically, and stylistically in his work (poetry, essays, academic interests, his penchant for crafting and skill at folk art). I interpret the trope of woodcraft through

the philosophical insights of Martinaitis himself and the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who expressed similar ideas at about the same time: according to her, the pre-modern way of crafting things with one's own hands and woodworking (*homo faber*) strengthens one's ties with the inhabited world, people's home on earth.

The fourth and longest chapter, 'States of Being', is the axis of this monographic study. In it, I examine the poetic situations of Martinaitis's poetry and observe the states of the subject and the intentions of their actions. Interestingly, the lyrical subject strives for several things: on the one hand, they strive to assimilate with their environment and disperse, though not without a trace: they want to be useful (they would like to be crafted into a footbridge, at which people stop to greet one another, or burned as an ornament into a chest, or ploughed and sowed on in a field). I explain the desire of the lyrical subject to disappear with *dediferatiation*, a term coined by René Girard, which denotes the stage in a ritual when individual characteristics and definitions are temporarily suspended and communality is experienced as primal. The contemporary philosopher Agata Bielik-Robson explains this term as the most generalised human condition (*conditio humana*) from which no-one can liberate oneself, regardless of how much one tries to express their individuality. That human condition is the shared situation of 'fatal misfortune': we are all temporary and mortal, and we must proceed in life by toiling away. According to Bielik-Robson, experiencing this interpersonal fate is a cathartic and dedifferentiation. The intention of dedifferentiation is clearly a response to one of the most prominent tendencies of modernity: the division of communities, disconnection, and alienation. In the same chapter, I analyse the way Martinaitis stylises different folklore genres (laments, ballads, romances) in his modern poetry. I presume that this stylistic approach is an attempt to reconstruct certain emotions, models of human relationship, and postures (for instance, sensitivity, healthy irony, compassion, and shyness) that may appear 'too sentimental' and, therefore, irrelevant for the modern world (bearing in mind Adorno's thesis that 'it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz'). Finally, in this chapter I discuss the paradoxes of modern subjectivity in Martinaitis's poetry of the Soviet era and in the period of re-established independence of

Lithuania. The paradoxes reveal how complex the creative worldview of Martinaitis is. His poetry is not just nostalgic nor does it simply idolise the past: it also reveals how detrimental the narrowness of an archaic worldview is. As mentioned above, Martinaitis carefully balances his creative position: he neither leans towards romanticising the archaic, nor towards modernity.

The last chapter, 'Ethnographic Self-Fashioning', summarises the global intellectual context and the creative practices of the twentieth century. Existentialism was one of the dominant unofficial aesthetic and ideological dominants of sociocultural life and literature. In this context, I discuss Martinaitis's connection with the literary generation of Lithuanians: the generation of émigré poets called *bežemiai*, 'the landless'. Even though Martinaitis did not leave his country, he lost his home because of Soviet reforms (his village was destroyed and his family home demolished), which left him feeling displaced, much like the émigré writers. A comparison of the poetry by Martinaitis with the work of the émigré poet Algimantas Mackus written at about similar time reveals many poetic similarities. It means that in the history of Lithuanian literature, Martinaitis can be placed somewhere between the generations of *žemininkai* ('the earth poets') and the 'landless' poets. Finally, I explore Martinaitis's autobiography. I approach it using James Clifford's concept of the 'ethnographic identity'; I observe the strategies of creating oneself in an autobiographical text. At the end of the chapter, I discuss the changes in the poetic worldview and creative position of Martinaitis's work after Lithuania regained its independence in 1990.

In this monograph, I conclude that Martinaitis's creative intentions and the model of self-interpretation, which I refer to as poetic anthropology, had a strong connection with the times in which he lived and the sociocultural and political context of the second half of the twentieth century in Lithuania. The study shows that creativity and social reality interact and mutually affect each other, which is why some of Martinaitis's artistic intentions could have been motivated and strengthened by the modern tendencies endorsed by the totalitarian regime, specifically, amnesia (eliminating and forgetting certain cultural meanings) and alienation (individual loneliness, the

destruction of traditional communities). In his work, Martinaitis strove to recreate cultural memory, to recall some cultural meanings, and to enhance the historical foundations of modernity.

To conclude, the aim of this book is to provide an integral discussion and interpretation of Martinaitis's multifaceted cultural practices by analysing his literary output along with other artistic and social expressions. The creative posture of Martinaitis, much like the twentieth century in general, can be defined as a state best described by James Clifford, 'being in culture while looking at Culture', when there is no single self-explanatory and inertly transferable relationship with tradition and history and when one must compile a set of individual meanings on one's own. Having observed several cultural contexts (the archaic agrarian lifestyle and the forms of modernity that coincided with the Soviet regime), Martinaitis, as a multifaceted artist, constructs a unique poetic worldview, which is not a vision of a 'frozen' world, but a vibrant, empowering, and tense process of perception that is in constant confrontation with itself. The structure of Martinaitis's worldview, which from time to time 'escapes' its own boundaries, is based on the author's intentions (Iser), which are contradictory and identified through aesthetic activity. On the one hand, the intention is cultural preservation, an attempt to provide meaning to certain fragments of life, movements, or gestures (like woodwork), and to maintain the ties with a deeper or more saturated cultural experience. Conversely, it is a cultural shift that arises from the tension of juxtaposing different contexts and different perceptual perspectives, which open after a turning point in civilization.

The contradicting intentions of preserving and transforming culture can be defined by the term 'poetic utopia', auto-reflectively chosen by Martinaitis himself to describe the creative worldview of the Soviet period. As the totalitarian regime was geared towards a single type of relation to history and tradition, the poetic worldview put forward by Martinaitis in the second half of the twentieth century provided the missing alternative for a more adequate cultural self-perception. This self-perception grew from the need to reflect the shift, the fracture, and the 'amputation pain' of civilisation (Ortega y Gasset) experienced in all aspects of life.

An analysis of aesthetic activity revealed an active interpretational anthropologic trope in Martinaitis's creative worldview, woodwork (*homo faber*), which is represented in his poetry (on the plane of imagery and style) and in practical (rebuilding the house) and social activity (his steps in monument protection). Martinaitis's poetic anthropology is connected to the common 'ethnographic' (Clifford) leanings of the twentieth century: selection of meanings and their collage arrangement as a unique way of cultural criticism.

In addition, reflection on the cultural fracture enables an anthropological philosophical intention: the goal of moving towards the most general understanding of the human condition (*condition humana*) from the perspective of the particular poetic utopia. A study into the states and emotional expressions of Martinaitis's lyrical subject revealed that the most general plane of human existence is an emotional (*vs* intellectual) undifferentiation (Girard, Bielik-Robson), connected to the cathartic effect of purifying oneself, even if temporarily, of individual divisive differences. In a secular, modern, 'anti-cathartic' (Bielik-Robson) culture, art and poetry become the only ways to experience a cathartic and undifferentiating common humanity. Martinaitis's poetic anthropology attempts to reveal for observation those models of relationship and worldviews, which, while not self-explanatory in modernity, provide an interpersonal amity in an ethnic worldview.

Thus, Martinaitis's poetic anthropology functions also as a critique of modernity aimed at the destructive tendencies of the epoch. By repurposing and preserving certain states, forms of relating to the world, and ways of speaking in his poetry, he unveils the destructive tendencies of modernity. Cultural amnesia is resisted by displaying and establishing the signifiers of the agrarian worldview, while totalitarian isolation and loneliness of individuals is opposed by striving for an undifferentiated state of being. Poetic anthropology is unique because it allows poetry to be used as a tool of mediation in re-creating and transforming meanings.

Martinaitis's poetic utopia ends with post-Soviet independence and the resulting sociocultural changes. As his poetry collections became fewer and further apart, Martinaitis started using his earlier

poetic worldview as a theme by revealing its artificial, unnatural, and 'souvenir-like' nature. The manner of memory preservation changes: the cultural task of preserving and transformation is handed over from poetic discourse to the genre of the essay that best liberates the voice of the author as an anthropologist. The conditions of the Soviet period intensified Martinaitis's need for poetic anthropology, although it is also manifest in the overall context of twentieth-century Western culture and its trends.

Martinaitis's poetic anthropology arises as a response to specific historical conditions (Soviet modernity in Lithuania); at the same time, it unfolds as the universal model of repurposing identity under the circumstances of cultural fracture. Martinaitis's poetic anthropology enables a complex self-perception that involves different aspects of living in modern culture and deals with its contradictions.

Translated by Gabija Barnard