

Lithuanian Poetry in the Light of European Existentialism: Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas

EUGENIJUS ŽMUIDA

Abstract. The article concentrates on the perspectives of two disciplines – the Lithuanian literature and philosophy of Existentialism – and their specific manifestations as *literature of existentialism*, and aims to represent how the main questions of existence began to arise in Lithuanian poetry and later were spread at the theoretical level at the university in Kaunas. Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas is the author whose works symbolically represent a turning point in Lithuanian literature. Finding himself in a difficult and ambiguous situation, having entered priesthood, the traditional education for peasant children, he had to break the ties with his past and gain status as an independent artist. The theme of choice, authentic life and questions of the human place in the universe found their poetic expression in the meditative poetry of Mykolaitis-Putinas. In the poetry of his last period, the theme of death becomes important and Heidegger's concept "Being-toward-death" ("Sein zum Tode") emerges as the last thrilling problem. Mykolaitis-Putinas had an impact on the younger generation of Lithuanian poets to whom existential problems were self-evident.

Keywords: Lithuanian Poetry, philosophy, Existentialism, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, free will, authentic being, fear, faith.

Two world wars in the 20th century made humankind more philosophical. And this had an impact on literature. On the other hand, philosophy had changed, already in the 19th century it had turned from the abstract speculation to man's problems, and it could be said philosophy needed literature even more than literature needed philosophy. Literature from the very beginning had philosophical digressions.

Probably it is the wrong question to ask what is more important or more influential – philosophy or literature. As Walter Kaufmann points out:

Eliot supposes that philosophy comes first and furnishes the poet with his *Weltanschauung*; but great poetry comes into being long before philosophy is born, and the great poets usually require no philosophy. (Kaufmann 1980: 279)

Literature (as well as philosophy) has its own logic and dialectic. Some parallels, of course, could be and even must be seen, and it allows us to talk about certain periods in culture.

Human life has always been a certain test of its substance. Existential problems did not appear only in the 19th or 20th century. Walter Kauffman called his book *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (first edition 1959), suggesting Existentialism was present already in Shakespeare. Moreover, in the case of Shakespeare, we are talking about tragedy, and it takes us back to Antiquity when the first European tragedies were written, also dealing with existential problems. Kaufmann continued to write books, logically calling them *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1968), *Existentialism, Religion, and Death* (1976).

Also, it is quite an open question whether it is the philosophical (abstract) or poetical (metaphorical) language that can better express “the truth”, describe human conditions, feelings, thoughts. Already Aristotle raised this question, saying that literature “is fairer and more versatile than history” (Steiner 1998: 172). Is it reasonable to raise such a question? “A work cannot be known neither by study nor faith, only by interpretation”, said the Lithuanian philosopher Antanas Maceina (Maceina 1994: 278). Paul Ricœur points out that “no given categorization can embrace all the semantic possibilities of a symbol. But it is the work of the concept alone that can testify to this surplus of meaning” (1976: 57). Therefore the research method and its structure are always double because they have to extend the power and the meaning of an artistic work.

Though Existentialism became popular in the years following the Second World War and the main authors of this period are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the roots of Existentialism have to be traced back to the 19th century. Søren Kierkegaard is generally considered to have been the first Existentialist philosopher, though he did not use the term Existentialism. Also in literature the main themes of Existentialism were developed much earlier: in the works of such authors as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, Rilke, Ionesco, Eliot, Hesse and the writers of the *Lost Generation*.

The same situation we can see in Lithuania: before existentialist themes arose theoretically, they first appeared in poetry. Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, a priest and the follower of Maironis, the most eminent figure in Lithuanian literature at the beginning of the 20th century, turned away from patriotic, historical, didactic, religious, political and other pragmatic problems and concentrated his attention on human problems. Mykolaitis-Putinas studied philosophy, history of art and literature in Europe and was granted the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. At this time he was attracted to philosophical lyrics and Russian symbolists. The concept of “being” was central to Mykolaitis-Putinas’ poetry. His collection of verses *Tarp dviejų aušrų* (*Between Two Dawns*, 1927)

marks a key turn to existential problems in Lithuanian literature. The poem with the same name opens the book:

Tarp dviejų aušrų pasaulis kaip
pasaka.

Iš žvilgančiu bokštų veizi
visareginčios akys,
ir jų regėjimais žaviesi tu pats,
patirdamas tolimą,
paslaptinę,
nesibaigiamą,
vientisą būtį.

Rytuose jau nuspėji besiartinančią
šviesą,

bet vakarų atšvaitos atgyja tavy
kaip seniai girdėtų
giedojimų aidai.
Visi daiktai kaip blankūs šešėliai
dvilypuojasi tavo regėjime,
ir tu nebežinai,
koku vardu juos vadinti.
Tavo paties būtis
nykais aidėjimais skrenda atgalios,
ir tau be galo liūdna.

Tarp dviejų aušrų, 1927¹

The world between two dawns is like
a fairy tale.

From the sleek towers all seeing eyes
watch over us,
and their visions you admire the
most,
meeting it as a distant,
mysterious,
never-ending,
integral being.

Now you guess the approaching
morning light,

But reflections of the evening fire
comes lively
as chant echoes from past time.
All things, like pale shadows,
become dual in in your visions,
and thou shalt no longer know
by what name to call them.
Your own being
silently frustrating flies back
and you become endlessly sad.

Between Two Dawns 1927,
translated by Eugenijus Žmuida

The beauty of the universe is there as God's work of art. This pictorial but static image the word "tale" brings to life and gives to it a mysterious and joyful depth. Two dawns emerge as a miracle of nature and the comparison to the "fairy tale" takes the reader to the mythical past of mankind, evokes the Biblical paradise, recalls childhood, each private paradise, a safe and happy state. It is a single line between God and human creation: God speaks through the beauty of the universe, and the artist transforms the universe into the word. Experiencing the unity of the two phenomena and inner harmony, accompanied by a "cosmic" chant, is the highest value of being. "Being" for Mykolaitis-Putinas, as this poem shows, is reachable but morning is coming and ecstasy ends. The

¹ Cited from V. Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Works*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1989, vol. 1, p. 179.

morning light is a symbol, or a correspondence (according to Baudelaire), of reason. The light of the coming day brings emptiness and routine. Morning is what is real, true, but the reality of this the hero does not want to accept, he would confront the evening and its superior content. However, as Kierkegaard had said, one can think of eternity and be open to it perfectly but one is a thrown into the world of time and temporality. The unity of infinity and the finite can be reached in a moment of passion but this moment is short. Therefore “a man is condemned to be a hunter for eternity, rather than its owner. In this aspect, human life is only continual becoming, uncertainty, change and anxiety” (Šliogeris 1981: 37). These aspects of human “fate” are reflected also in other poems by Mykolaitis-Putinas.

The Heaven of the night – the key figure of metaphysical poetry – helps one to experience perpetuity and not feel one’s own mortality in the face of eternity, it also helps one realize that one’s own existence is of incomparable value for which one is responsible. So one knows oneself not directly but through signs.

[...]

Vėlai aš išėjau į tuščią lauką
Tavim pasigėrėt, gilus dangau.
Pakėliau veidą į žvaigždėtą aukštį –
Ir tartum lašas jūroj išnykau.

[...]

Tyli naktie, šviesi rudens naktie!
Tau daug yr žiburių dangum spindėti,
O man širdis viena, tyli liūdna:
Tau šviesti ir žavėt o man mylėti.

Rudenio naktį, 1922²

[...]

I went late into the blank field
To wonder at thee, deep heaven.
I raised my face to the starry heights –
And like a drop I disappeared.

[...]

Silent Night, clear autumn night!
You have many lights shine,
My heart stays silent, sad;
You can excite, but I can love.

*In Autumn Night, 1922,
translated by Eugenijus Žmuida*

Night time is “my” time, a time for meditation and conversation with one’s own soul. But daytime is strange – it belongs to the philistine world, or, in Heidegger’s term, to genderless and nameless “Das Man”. Every day’s masquerade forces one into false existence, where one dances wearing a mask like the harlequin or clown.

² Cited from V. Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Works*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1989, vol. 1, p. 203.

Ir nežinau, kad ryt ir vėl su saule,
 Ant veido užsimovęs margą kaukę,
 Žingsniuosisiu, kaip lyg šiol, į šviesų
 rūmą
 Kur nieks mane nei sveikina, nei
 laukia.

Rudensio naktį, 1922

And I will know that in the sunny day
 I'll pull on again a colourful mask,
 And stride as usual the lightsome
 chamber,
 Where nobody welcomes me, neither
 awaits.

In Autumn Night, 1922,
 translated by Eugenijus Žmuida

In this poem the main problem is of authentic and inauthentic being – one of the most actual problems of Existentialism. “Only man has the world, not only a situation” (Ricœur 1981: 122). Thus, man always exists in the world with others. Reviewing Mykolaitis-Putinas’ poetry as the whole, Nyka-Niliūnas (as Andrius Sietynas) wrote: “From a certain standpoint, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas is one of the most tragic personalities in Lithuanian literature. Fated from his very adolescence to be an “eternal spiritual emigrant”, he constantly had to struggle with the discipline imposed on him by someone else, to obey someone, not being in a position nor having the necessary willpower to rebel openly” (Andrius Sietynas 1965: 49), and cited a few verses from the poem *Vergas* (*The Slave*):

Gyvenu aš savo viešpačio namuose
 Nepažįstamas, užklydęs pakeleivis.

Kur einu – visur atverti vartų vartai,
 Bet išeit į plačią laisvę negaliu.

*Vergas, 1924*³

In the palace of my Lord I dwell
 A traveler, a stranger brought by
 chance.

Gates are open wide – where'er I turn,
 Yet the freedom that's beyond I
 cannot reach.

The Slave, 1924,
 translated by Andrius Sietynas

Mykolaitis-Putinas focused his attention on personal responsibility, the meaning and purpose of life. Entering the Pantheon of Lithuanian literature as a seminarian and priest in 1911, in 1934 he cut down the tradition of cleric writers, in the autobiographical novel *Altorių šešėly* (*In the Shadow of Altars*, 1933), declaring that it was impossible to be a priest and a poet at the same time because the priest is not a free person. Seemingly the long period of searching

³ Cited from V. Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Works*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1989, vol. 1, p. 245.

for himself, doubt and scruples enabled Mykolaitis-Putinas to construct the binary world of two struggling opposites and create a dramatic inner tension in his poetry. Is man free to choose his own fate or is he determined by circumstances or God? Can he show his own face or should he hide behind a mask? And finally – is he able to cut all bonds, to reject all authorities and enter the realm of freedom or is he damned to stay with a slave’s consciousness with never-ending reflections? To act, to live is a very important call in Mykolaitis-Putinas’ poetry dealing with important statements of Existentialist philosophy – existence precedes essence.

Nes pažvelgęs pro mažutį bokšto langą, Pamačiau, kad aš tas pats tik menkas vergas, Kurs kaip vakar, taip ir šiandie neberanda Savo kelio į pasaulio platybes.	Because I look through the tiny window of the tower, I see that I am just the same poor slave, Who isn’t able, as yesterday, so today to find One’s way to the vastness of the world.
Ir suspaudė mano galvą tokia gėla, Kad tariau pabirs po kojų šaltos plytos, Ir išsirakins aukštųjų skliautų siūlės,	And ache pinched my head so tightly, That I said: crumble down to my feet cold bricks, And gothic vaults of the temple split apart,
Ir ugnim išsprogs įkaitę smilkiniai.	And heated temples of my head will explode.

Vergas, 1924⁴

The Slave, 1924,
translated by Eugenijus Žmuida

It can be said that the poem grows out of long and constant anxiety, the tension between the subject and the world. This anxiety (and the subject and the source) could be called even the basic one, knowing his constancy. *The Slave* is a fundamental study of anxiety. Lithuanian literature for the first time creates a hero who is moving deep into himself, openly deconstructing himself and exploring this in an artistic manner. According to Anthony Giddens, Kierkegaard states that “Freedom is not a precondition of the individual characteristic, but comes with human liberty, freedom derived from an ontological understanding of external reality and personal identity” (Giddens 2000: 67).

⁴ Cited from V. Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Works*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1989, vol. 1, p. 247.

Mykolaitis-Putinas' life is a constant challenge which ripens till its expression is finding a more and more precise expression or a group of images that enhance the summative and philosophical dimension of the problem. The cycle of verses *Viršūnēs ir gelmēs* (*Heights and Abysses*), which could be called "an ontology of will", is one of the most impressive of his poetic visions, synthesizing previous personal problems and fruitfully transforming previous intertextual contexts. Mountains and abysses, keeping only a minimal contact with reality and being turned into dualistic marks, constructed on the principle of contrast and rewarding their truth-protecting voices, speak of personal drama in a new and unusual language, expressive of dramatic visual thinking. Every word in this small text bears a maximum load. This is a new and very productive intensity. When reading the first part of the poem *Introduction*, we can recognize the famous dilemma "either – or" of the Danish philosopher, and some sentences from his work sound like a comment to the *Introduction*: "there are people whose soul too wilted, and therefore they do not understand what it means that dilemma, their personality lack the energy to be able to say with pathos: Either – or" (Kierkegaard 1974: 107–108); "Same choice determines the content of the personality; it goes into choosing what to choose, and if you do not choose, it shrinks in distress" (Kierkegaard 1974: 112). So we could state that the "either – or" discovery is already a big victory and a condition for becoming a free person. The hero of Mykolaitis-Putinas' poem desperately tries to reach the mountain peak that is the symbol of the absolute. "But what is absolute? – Kierkegaard asks. – This is myself with my eternal value" (Kierkegaard 1974: 122). But it is not enough to have an absolute ideal, there is the need for the will to achieve it. The *Introduction* is the work of the will, of the concentration and triumph of the will. We see the birth of the new "I", another person in Nietzsche's terms, the Superman. And a new morality: there is no good and evil, there is only weakness and strength. Nietzsche says: "Man is something that is to be surpassed" (Nietzsche 1999: 22). "Heights and Abysses" is an extremely vivid example of Mykolaitis-Putinas' expression of one of his most important themes – the individual's self-creation, in accordance with the highest criteria of conscience. Mykolaitis-Putinas is building his own categorical imperative. Man is responsible to himself and above all he has to fulfill his obligation to himself. As Henri Bergson says, "Obligation, which we look upon as a bond between men, first binds us to ourselves" (Bergson 1932: web). To create his inner self with the ultimate quality of the high ideal is the main task of the poem's hero. Mykolaitis-Putinas provides such a commitment and an operating model, an artistic anatomy of man's spiritual structure. The meaning of existence is justified only when it is carried out. This requires the will. Hence, will is also the ontological ground of human existence. Finally, the

will is nothing else than the love of pure life, measured by the highest moral criteria.

“My consciousness of being exists in such a way that it is constantly questioning its existence,” – Sartre has said (1943: 281). This thought brings us back to Heidegger’s “Dasein”, which is interpreted by him as “care”. Individualistic “caring” for oneself, one’s authenticity and identity, often in a romantic manner, is opposed to the “others” and God, who seek to destroy one or force one to live by the common law, offering it as “care”. But there is another aspect of “care”. A man who strives for the perfect self cannot be perfect or completely happy only by just taking and giving nothing back to the world, to the “being” as entirety – from which, in any case, he takes his own “being”. Mykolaitis-Putinas grew up in a rural area and knew the hard “being” of the peasants. Wayside shrines, which were to make life easier, were very popular in Lithuania. One of them was special – the sculpture of the so-called “Pensive Christ” or “Christ in Distress”, which in Lithuania is connected to the word “care” – “Rūpintojėlis” (where the root of the noun originates from the verb “rūpintis”, meaning to “take care, to worry”, and the suffix “ėlis” shows the diminutive form of the noun). Despite the sculpture originating in Christ on the road to Golgotha, the allusion to Christ is almost lost in Lithuania because an old man usually is depicted by Lithuanian folk carvers and the figure’s name has no adequate translation in other languages (Surdokaitė 2010: 139–159). The meaning of the figure is understood as implying longing, understanding and pity. The poem “Rūpintojėlis” is considered to be one of Mykolaitis-Putinas’ highest achievements in poetry.

Dievuli mano, kas per šviesios naktys!	Good Lord, how luminous autumnal nights are!
Ir kas plačių padangių per aukštumas!	How high the vast heaven opens up above us!
O žvaigždės, žvaigždės! didelės ir mažos	The stars, those teeming stars, both large and tiny,
Taip spindi, net graudu, Dievuli mano.	So glittering, move me to tears, my Lord!
Išeisiu, sau tariau, ant lygaus kelio:	This is the time to go out on a high road:
Ant lygaus kelio tai valia valužė,	On a smooth road one only can be footloose,
Ant lygaus kelio šviesiąją naktužę	On a smooth road on a bright night as this one
Tai tik jaunam plačias dūmas dūmoti.	Sweet youth may well indulge in lofty dreams.

Bet kam gi tu, budrus Dievuli mano,	But why do you, my watchful Lord, keep vigil
Prie lygaus kelio rūpestėliu rymai?	By the smooth road like silent human sorrow?
Prie lygaus kelio, kur vargų vargeliai	By the smooth road where you can see in daylight
Vieni per dienas dūšaudami vaikšto.	Only our woes pass by with heavy sights.
Dievuli mano, ar gi mūsų godos	Good Lord, is it indeed our restless dream life
Tave prie kelio iš dangaus atprašė,	That called you down from heaven to the roadside?
Ar gal tos šviesios rudenio naktųžės	Or are you just a vivid earthly vision
Tave iš mūsų žemės išsapnavo?	Created the bright autumnal nights?
Taip spindi, net graudu, Dievuli mano.	Allow me at your side, our watchful savior,
Priimki gi mane, budrus Rūpintojėli,	By the smooth road tonight to stay and ponder.
Prie lygaus kelio šiānakt padūmoti. –	The luminously bright stars high in heaven
O kad aukštam danguj tos šviesios žvaigždės.	So glittering, move me to tears, my Lord.

Rūpintojėlis, 1926⁵

Pensive Christ by the roadside, 1926,
translated Lionginas Pažūsis⁶

Nighttime as acting time dominates Mykolaitis-Putinas' book *Between Two Dawns*. But in this case the situation is different because the hero has a desire to communicate, to share the impressions caused by the starlit sky. He appeals to the sorrowful God trying to solve his riddle, at the same time thinking of his own relationship with "being" which is represented by the sorrowful God. Mykolaitis-Putinas is able to harmonize philosophical reflection with religious and folkloristic elements, giving them a deeper meaning and also retaining the melody and softness of folk songs. Similar images of sorrowfully contemplating man are known from the Neolithic sculptures in Europe, dating back to several thousand years before Christ (Gimbutas 1982: 230–234). In this case it is worth

⁵ Cited from V. Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Works*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1989, vol. 1, p. 263.

⁶ Cited from *Lietuvių poezijos balsai / Voices of Lithuanian poetry*, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2001, p. 41 and 43.

remembering an old Indo-European myth (known in antiquity, also Goethe uses it in *Faust*, the myth is discussed later by Heidegger), which tells the story of the deity (the Romans called it “Cura”, which means “Care” or “Worry”), who is involved in the creation of man: the Earth (the earth goddess, for example Tellus) provides a body (from clay), after death the body goes back to the earth again; Sky (Sky God) inspires the spirit, so that after death the soul travels to heaven; but as long as man lives, he belongs to the patronage of Care, the deity (Hansen 2001: 479). The motherly aspect of the sorrowful God is clearly seen in the poem – in the function he performs. The roadside sculpture is, of course, a mediator and martyr, who absorbs the hardships and disasters of poor people. One can see the sorrowful God in several dimensions: see it in the sky, feel at one’s side and experience inside. Anyway, the “speaking” voice of the poem is not a typical monologue of meditation, rather it is a dialogue, an imitation of naive questioning. The poem conveys immediate excitement arising from having a completely new, unknown experience. The young hero of the poem who just decided to go outdoors to experience free will and freedom meets something that shocks him and he finds himself in a state of the awakened Buddha who for the first time understands that there is not only the wonderful world but also pain, old age and death. He finds the world of the humiliated and insulted, and they have their own silent, suffering Lord. The subject of the poem has an excess of internal energy that begins to sound an unexpected call for the new truth of existence. He obeys this call and feels called to commitment: free will matures in him, sanctifying the necessity for sacrifice. “In giving something up a hidden thanks comes to pass [ereignet sich] which alone pays respect to graciousness [Huld], as what be[ing] itself has conveyed [übereignet hat] to the essence of man in thinking, in order in harmony [Bezug] with be[ing] to assume guardianship over be[ing]”, writes Heidegger in *What is Metaphysics?* (Heidegger 1949: 68–69). Sacrifice is a “hidden thanks” for being and the highest form of coexistence with the world. The repeated emphasis on visual beauty (“the stars, the stars”) and the soul’s effusive desire to participate in the sacrifice, to sacrifice one’s freedom and become the bodyguard of the new “being”, highlights the mysterious, difficult to justify but in the depths of the soul instinctively intuited, aesthetic and ethical unity which Kant expressed with the unforgettable metaphor – “the starry heavens above and the moral law within”. Mykolaitis-Putinas’ poem expresses this truth.

The Soviet occupation of the Baltic States and ideological coercion did not allow Mykolaitis-Putinas to speak in his own voice for a long time, despite the fact that he was considered one of the most famous writers of the time. Only in the last decade of his life, feeling sick and living in constant expectation of death, he started writing poetry consistent with himself. As Sietynas wrote in

the conclusion of his article, “The dominant moods are those of fatigue, apathy, and the total resignation of a man who has seen, suffered, understood, been disappointed in, and lost many things. Most of the collection shows Putinas to have been a truly authentic and great poet.” (Sietynas 1965: 64).

Nusmuko termometras –
Po nulio dvidešimt penki.
O tu šaltos vasario saulės
Savy dar liekanas renki.

Pūga išgairino tau kaulus,
Akis apibėrė sniegu –
Kažkur pavidalai apgaulūs
Keliantis rūkstančiu lauku.

Vėlai šaltoj vasario saulėj
Tą šėmą rytą pakilau.
Lazda jau laukia piligrimo –

Ir aš keliauti privalau.
Sustoju, laukiu – –
Įsiklausau – – –
Ant lūpų stingsta kvapas

Baltu šerkšnu – – –
Per pūgą, šaltį ir pusnis,

Pasekdamas vasario saule,
Tolyn einu.

Rūstus, nykus šios žemės svečias,

Aš žydrus tolius pamilau.
Išvesk mane per žvarbią pūgą,

Nežinomos lemties brolau.

Decadent thermometer –
After twenty-five zero.
And you debris of February sun
Still gathering inwardly.

Blizzard pierce you bones,
Eye heap of snow –
Something in the vague forms
Travels through the vapour field.

Frigid sun of February morning –
I stood so late...

The walking-stick already waits for
me – the pilgrim –
And I have to travel.
I stop and look around – –
Listened – – –
On the lips breath cures

White frost – – –
During the snowstorm,
cold and snowdrift,
Following the sun,
I step forward.

Scorching, inhospitable, only a guest
on this earth,

I had loved light blue skyline.
Take me through the harsh winter
storm,

Brother of my unknown fate.

*Vasario pūgoj, 1964*⁷

Blizzard in February, 1964,
translated by Eugenijus Žmuida

⁷ Cited from Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, *Works*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1990, Vol. 2, p. 260.

In this short poem many changes can be clearly seen. Mykolaitis-Putinas' hero is caught now by low temperatures and winter's blizzard – symbols of death and emptiness of being. In the first two strophes the personality is split apart – one voice is ironically appealing to the other, but the situation gets worse: the cold enters the body, the snow blinds. Two voices should unite and resist the inevitable coming of death which is very near. "The walking-stick" shows how weak the speaker is and "the Pilgrim" is the role that brings together a certain acting program and fulfills the emptiness inside. The hero is aware of his failure, so part of the responsibility for his own existence he carries over to "the Pilgrim". "The Pilgrim" and "a guest on this earth" are not accidental – they evoke associations with religious literature. The human "Being" is temporal and man can do nothing about it. Human value is determined by the choices made with this gloomy perspective in mind. The subject of the poem chooses, or recalls, things he believed: "I had loved light blue skyline". The second color (blue) in this poem counterweights the white (the color of death). It is the color of life, warmth, dreams, hope, fairy (Maeterlinck's "Blue Bird"). Man covets not only to be, but to be nice. Human life's "weight" consists of what was loved, what was deliberately chosen. Self-determination, or, as Jaspers says, "[t]he decision becomes the substance of the human" (Jaspers 1954: 59). "Blue skyline" helps one to forget about impermanence, even ignoring it (unconsciously everyone is convinced of his immortality). The line "I had loved light blue skyline" is the "backbone" of one's whole existence. "I had" means it happened a long time ago, but by only maintaining the stability of previous faith, I can withstand the cold consistent hardness. Walking in the direction of faith remains the only ideal to be carried through the world even without knowing the ultimate goal. The final sentence of the poem shows that every human being needs support. It is hard to say who is the "Brother" to whom the last appeal is addressed and who can lead one "through the harsh winter". Could it be the God? One answer cannot be found but the appeal is important. It is very adequate to the vulnerability and troubled tone of the poem. Mykolaitis-Putinas at that time lived in the Soviet period and could speak only indirectly, through symbols and hidden signs.

In the last two collections of poetry *Būties valanda* (*The Hour of Being*, 1963) and *Langas* (*The Window*, 1966) Mykolaitis-Putinas opens up to the possibility of death, and the treatment of being becomes closer to Heidegger's concept "Being-toward-death" ("Sein zum Tode"). While the whole non-classical philosophy (from Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard) engages subjective ontology, i. e. the mortal human ontology, the concept of death becomes the "cornerstone": the worth of being becomes evident in the face of death. This trend significantly strengthened in the 20th century, when the practice of mass

murder and the possibility of finally self-destruction reached their limits. The “breath of death” pervades all the philosophy and literature of Existentialism. The late poems by Mykolaitis-Putinas have to be seen in the context this “breathing”. The lines “Scorching, inhospitable only a guest on this earth, / I had loved light blue skyline” recalls a liturgical cliché. However, spoken after facing personal death, they become a reference to ontological issues. If one does not want to be caught by death, freeze into its final form, one will always seek to “reform” death – if it is not possible physically, then at least it is spiritually. Meeting one’s own death as the last crossroads is impossible without preparing oneself for the purification of one’s soul and therefore the “blue skyline” should be understood as an object, directed to the future and at the same time as the content of one’s whole life, the artist’s legacy, left in the final hour. The past in the light of the future is emerging as the new notional whole. The moment of death is not tragic because it provides a sense of life. Physical death cannot end the human project. It continues to be involved in other existential projects and is acquiring a new meaning. Death is the “truest” reality, or, as Heidegger states, “Death is Dasein’s ownmost possibility” (Heidegger 1962: 307). Therefore it is almost impossible to meet one’s own death without the “aesthetic armor”. But how to meet death if one is not an artist? The human mind perceives death and inevitably devotes itself to death as a blackout. If anything could be done in the last moment then it is to give up thinking because the rational mind cannot help. There are only two ways – to stay clear in the mind and meet the emptiness and nothingness of being as the absurdity of human existence, or to break free of one’s own individuality and to give credence to someone who will bring you “through the harsh winter storm”. In this poem Mykolaitis-Putinas is closer to Karl Jaspers’s “faith” than to Martin Heidegger’s “Being-toward-death”. In the “Introduction to Philosophy” Jaspers wrote: “In ultimate situations man either perceives nothingness of senses as true being in spite of and above all ephemeral worldly existence. Even despair, by the very fact that it is possible in the world, points beyond the world. Or, differently formulated, man seeks redemption. They are characterized by an objective guarantee of the true and reality of redemption. Their road leads to an act of individual conversion. This philosophy cannot provide. And yet all philosophy is a transcending of the world, analogous to redemption” (Jaspers 1954: 23). The poem “Blizzard in February” provokes a “theistic” interpretation but it does not include the whole spectrum of relationships to nothingness in the late poetry by Mykolaitis-Putinas. It is possible that for the poet it was not easy to find the adequate answer to the ultimate question of being. But in philosophical lyrics as well as in philosophy it is important to go into “deep” questions and leave them open. Literature does so in an aesthetic way, and the unity of those few aspects

makes its special. The emotional and intellectual discourse is compelled into a singular aesthetic vision which defines what it means to be human in an inexplicable world, what it means to try to find a place of both physical and metaphysical worlds and to live and die with some measure of meaning.

Being a well-known poet and writer, literary critic and scientist, working as a professor (1922–1940) in Kaunas University and chairing there the young poets's society, being a professor (1940–1954) in Vilnius University, Mykolaitis-Putinas had an impact on younger generations of future philosophers and poets. Existential philosophy was new at the time in Europe but already in the 1930s it attracted Lithuanian philosophers. In 1936 Juozas Girnius chose as the topic for his graduation thesis *The Principles of Heidegger's Existential Philosophy*. Soon after, Girnius attended Heidegger's seminars in Germany in 1937. Later he turned to the philosophy of Jaspers. In 1951, at Montreal University, he was awarded the doctorate for his thesis *Liberty and Being. The Existential Metaphysics of Karl Jaspers*. The main work of Girnius, *Žmogus be Dievo (Man without God, 1964)*, was published in Chicago and remains the best philosophical treatise in Lithuanian discussing existential questions of twentieth-century world literature. Maceina is another important name for spreading ideas of Existentialism in Lithuanian culture. Girnius and Maceina both lectured in Kaunas and Vilnius Universities during the Second World War and introduced Existential philosophy to students, using for the analysis of philosophical concepts the fictional works by Rilke, Hölderlin, Ibsen, Dostoyevsky and others. Those lectures influenced almost an entire generation of young Lithuanian poets, who made their debuts during the Second World War and now are classics of Lithuanian poetry. A few of them, first of all Vytautas Mačernis and Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, can be called followers of Mykolaitis-Putinas: they stay focused on the existential problematic and develop the same themes, but already in the more dramatic atmosphere of war and the post-war homelessness and exile.

Summarizing Lithuanian poetry in the context of the European Existentialism the following can be said: the most prominent problems for Mykolaitis-Putinas were choice, authentic and inauthentic being, will to inner freedom and man's place in being as a whole. In his late poetry we can clearly see is the fear of death and the desire to escape, to solve the problem of death without losing one's sense of authenticity. Mačernis believed in living and in fighting for the meaning of life. Existentialism was darkest in Nyka-Niliūnas poetry, sometimes verging on the absurd. But all the main themes of European Existentialism – such as loneliness, alienation, suffering, anxiety and despair, nothingness, meaninglessness and absurdity – were developed in Lithuanian poetry. Lithuanian culture for a long time had an inferiority complex, caused

by unfortunate historical circumstances. It was the first time when Lithuanian poetry found itself within European Literature almost simultaneously with the new trends.

Eugenijus Žmuida

eugen.zmuida@gmail.com

Vėdrynų g. 25

LT-52321 Kaunas

LIETUVA

Bibliography

- Bergson, Henri, “The Two Sources of Morality and Religion”, https://archive.org/stream/twosourcesofmora033499mbp/twosourcesofmora033499mbp_djvu.txt (04.02.15)
- Giddens, A. 2000. 1982. *Modernybė ir asmens tapatumas*. Vilnius: Pradai.
- Gimbutas, M. 1982. *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500 B.C. Myths and Cult Images*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hansen, W. 2001. *Ariadne’s Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Heidegger, M. *What is Metaphysics?* Transl. Miles Groth. <http://wagner.edu/psychology/files/2013/01/Heidegger-What-Is-Metaphysics-Translation-GROTH.pdf> (04.02.15).
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time*. Transl. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row.
- Jaspers, K. G. 1954. *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*. Transl. Ralph Manheim. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Kaufmann, W. 1980. *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. Arba – arba. – *Filosofijos istorijos chrestomatija*. Vilnius: Mintis
- Nietzsche, F. 1999. *Thus Spake Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche*. Transl. Thomas Common. The Pennsylvania State University, <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/nietzsche/tszarath.pdf> (04.02.15).
- Ricoeur, P. 1976. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. J. B. Thompson, ed., Cambridge, UK: State University of New York Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1943. *L’être et le néant*. Paris: Galimard.
- Steiner, G. 1998. *Tikrosios esatys*. Vilnius: Aidai.
- Sietynas, A. 1965. “The condition of a free prisoner: Poetry and Prose of Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas”. – *Lituanus*, Volume 11, No.1, Spring 1965, Chicago, 48–64.

- Surdokaitė, G. 2010. „Rūpintojėlis lietuvių tautosakoje ir liaudies skulptūroje: pagrindiniai sampratos aspektai“ [„Rūpintojėlis in Lithuanian Oral Folklore and Folk Sculpture: The Main Aspects of Conception“]. – *Tautosakos darbai* XL, 2010.
- Šliogeris, A. 1981. S. Kierkegoras – egzistencinio mąstymo pradininkas. – *Egzistencijos filosofija: istorija ir dabartis*. Vilnius: Mintis, 19–50.