

Vilnius Poker by Ričardas Gavelis

The Reception of a Soviet Novel in the North American Market

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ABSTRACT

In 1989, *Vilniaus Pokeris* by Ričardas Gavelis was first published in Lithuanian. It marked the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet Lithuanian literature, both because its publication coincided with (or rather, was only possible because of) the fall of the Soviet Union, and because its contents and literary features were so bold and innovative in the context of the contemporary Lithuanian literature. In 2009, the novel, already firmly established at home, was translated into English and published in the USA. The paper discusses how the reception of the American readers differed from the reception at home, especially focusing on issues that depend on knowledge and experience of the late Soviet context.

IN 1987, RIČARDAS GAVELIS, A LITHUANIAN PHYSICIST WITH SOME published short stories to his name, wrote what is presumed to be his first novel, *Vilniaus pokeris*. The text contained both violent and sexually explicit scenes, and even worse, harsh criticism of the Soviet regime and its leaders, and so it posed a very real danger to its author were it to fall into the wrong hands. Its publication was at first obviously out of question, so Gavelis divided the manuscript into several parts and gave it to trusted friends for safekeeping. He never revealed the identity of the friends, even after the book was eventually published (GAVELIENĖ ET AL. 2007, 50). In 1989, with the Soviet regime disintegrating and just months before the declaration of Lithuanian independence, the book was published by the state publishing house, still the only one available at the time, and the date of its publication is often considered to mark the dividing line between the Soviet and the post-Soviet Lithuanian literature (SPRINDYTĖ et al. 2010). The first edition (GAVELIS 1989) simultaneously became a huge bestseller—it sold 100 thousand copies in Lithuanian market of fewer than 3 million readers—and caused outrage because of the revolting horror scenes within its pages, its nihilist attitudes and the disrespectful view

of Lithuania and Lithuanians it promotes. Gavelis proceeded to write several more books before his death in 2002 at the age of 51. For the most part, these novels further develop the mythologization and personification of the city of Vilnius, both the capital city of Lithuania and the author's hometown.

In 2009, Elizabeth Novickas published an English translation of *Vilniaus pokeris* entitled *Vilnius Poker* with *Open Letter Books*, the University of Rochester publisher (GAVELIS 2009). At first glance, its print run of 4500 copies may seem modest, but that rate is a slightly above average for a translation in the United States, and the work continued to find success at home, for, by that time, four Lithuanian editions had been published. The second edition, in 1990 by *Vaga*, was essentially an additional print run, even the design was the same. By 1997, Gavelis' work was picked up by *Tyto alba*, one of the largest publishers without any Soviet past, and remained on their program for the rest of his life and career, and so the third and fourth editions (in 2000 and in 2011) were published there. There are no major linguistic differences between the texts of the various editions, and each new edition was only proofread for typos and similar minor corrections. The subsequent print runs never reached the improbable numbers of the first one, but still have sold better than average.

The plot of the book is notoriously difficult to summarize. The first two thirds related the first-person narrative of its main character, Vytautas Vargalys, who, born before the occupation, became a freedom-fighter and was, consequently, persecuted, tortured and deported to a labor camp in Siberia. All of these harrowing experiences are told either in strange loops of time or through flashbacks that are italicized for easy identification, narrative strategies meant to intimate that these memories haunt Vytautas. He returned, an obviously damaged person, and at the time of the main events of the narrative is employed in a library, working on an electronic catalogue of books that are forbidden to the Soviet citizens. He holds to a theory about *Them*, a mysterious force of evil beings that rule the world by dehumanizing people, turning them dull and subservient. The closest thing to a real plotline comes in the love story of Vytautas and Lolita, a much younger woman who comes to work at the same library. By the end of the narrative, Vytautas is charged with the brutal murder and mutilation of Lolita.

The rest of the book consists of three more narratives told by Vytautas' two colleagues and one close friend who is deceased and reincarnated as a stray dog. They still revolve around the horrible murder and the events leading up to it, but clearly contradict each other on various essential points.

The reader is left with no explanation of what actually happened, only with a capitalized verdict that “DOGS DON’T DISTINGUISH DREAMS FROM REALITY” (GAVELIS 2009, 485).

Readers of *Vilnius Poker*, both Lithuanian and American, are the author’s contemporaries or near-contemporaries, so we do not see a great distance in time that would interfere with understanding the details of the reality. However, as the author’s compatriots, most Lithuanians share his experience of the historical and social situation, either first-hand or second-hand through older family members and acquaintances (e.g. teachers). Americans may or may not have basic factual knowledge of the living conditions in the Soviet Union and share neither language nor historical experience. The translator chose to provide virtually no additional comment in the book itself with the exception of a single footnote to explain a linguistic pun that proved impossible to translate. Explaining her choice during an interview with a Lithuanian newspaper, she said that nowadays a person who doesn’t know what the Iron Wolf means only has to google the reference (STANKEVIČIŪTĖ 2009). However, she did publish a long essay providing her own interpretation of the book, and several of her readers cited it as very useful (NOVICĖKAS 2004).

In analyzing this kind of bifurcated reception, a sociological theory of literature might employ a deterministic perspective that asserts belonging to a social and cultural context “shapes” literary production and reception. However, approaching the situation from another angle by taking readers and their reactions at face value may reveal how those reactions relate to the specific communicative context in which they read the book. More could be said about literature as a process of communication—albeit a very complicated one—between individual people as well as between cultures themselves. For this reason, script acts theory becomes an attractive alternative as a theoretical and even methodological approach in this situation because it is so inclusive.¹ While presented in a mild and careful manner and called “an overview of a variety of literary strategies rather than a comprehensive unified field theory” (SHILLINGSBURG 2006, 1), it seems to be, in fact, very comprehensive and thus capable of providing a “trunk” of insights that can function as guidelines for distinguishing between legitimate interpretation and what might be called “junk criticism”. At the same time, these guidelines follow logically from the thorough analysis of the

1. The grounds for the script acts theory were laid in SHILLINGSBURG 1991, an article that was later adapted as a chapter in SHILLINGSBURG 1997, which was further developed in SHILLINGSBURG 2006.

variety of the script acts involved in both writing and reading of literature, and therefore avoid being too radical or judgmental to prevent a lively discussion of conflicting views. In fact, some of these insights seem, at least at first sight, to be at odds with each other, but the theory allows contradiction and inconsistency much rather than a reductionist understanding of literary works and communicative processes that surround them.

The theory departs from the apparently obvious fact that literary works are written, read, and discussed, under particular, if not perfectly known, physical, social, psychological and personal circumstances. These circumstances provide a “sememic molecule”, a framework in which meaning is generated by selecting logical alternatives to what is said.² While script acts theory also holds that the intended sememic molecule remains obscure not because it is not possible to infer it from the text itself, but because there is no way to verify if the inference is correct, factual knowledge of the circumstances of the writer and the reader can still reveal very interesting and eloquent cases of successful or unsuccessful communication between them (SHILLINGSBURG 1997; 2006). Furthermore, an additional development comes in the comparison of “performance protocols” among various readers in order to reveal both a greater variety of likely sememic molecules in which the same linguistic text is understood as well as a broader scale on which the success or lack thereof of the communication can be “measured”.

In order to analyze the knowledge, assumptions, and attitudes of Gavelis’ American readers, as opposed to Lithuanian ones, script acts theory proves useful. We can identify at least some divergent readings that can be explained through recourse to social, historical, and cultural circumstances.

For the purposes of this paper, everyone is, quite simply, “a reader”. It is, of course, possible and productive to provide further cross-sections according to publication types in which a performance protocol appears, the status of the reader, and for Lithuanians, there is some difference in whether they were old enough to read the first edition when it appeared or only later ones. However, script acts theory says that every reader can only react to his or her own individual concept of the text. While a more nuanced analysis would probably provide more interesting insights into both the book and its readers, the task here is only to show the most striking highlights without covering all the possible details.

2. Shillingsburg borrowed the term from Price Caldwell’s version of communication theory (SHILLINGSBURG 1997, 34–36).

My corpus of performance protocols is comprised of thirteen Lithuanian and nineteen American sources, the majority of which are blog entries describing personal impressions and reactions to the book. This choice obviously leaves Lithuanians at something of a disadvantage, because at the time of the first edition the internet access and social media were unavailable, and only through more formal book reviews can we trace early reception. More personal reactions from readers became available only later. On the other hand, Lithuanian sources include three academic articles, mostly dealing with the representation of the city in the context of Gavelis' other books and several of his contemporary writers. One of these articles (ČERŠKUTĖ 2013) very efficiently provides an analysis of the scenes and elements which shocked and baffled many readers incapable of applying the more complicated tools of literary analysis on both sides of the Atlantic. In American book reviews, there is a tendency to provide more background information and plot summary, whereas Lithuanian reviewers more readily assume that their audience has already read the book and only needs "help" in understanding and interpreting it, or they assume nothing at all and proceed to state their case as they see fit. While space here will not permit a lengthy analysis of these distinctions, it should be pointed out that the Lithuanian reviewers may be incorrect to assume that their audience knows the book already. Nevertheless, it is an instance that illuminates differences in the critical traditions of the two countries.

With these observations in mind, let us take a look at several of the more striking differences in the reception of *Vilnius Poker*. A recurrent comment in American performance protocols amounts to accusations of misogyny. Debates raged among the readers on whether this is the author's real attitude or that it merely forms part of the fictional main character's personality. Only one Lithuanian reader mentioned in passing that Gavelis doesn't understand women, that no woman feels and thinks the way he writes about them, and so perhaps he would be better off not trying to delve into the female psyche that much. The "relevant unsaid" hidden here is the fact that, over and above the rape and violence scenes that are shocking in themselves (and it should be noted that not only women fall victim to violence in the book), relationships between men and women as described in the book are, in fact, very true to life. One detail that irked American readers was the main character's female colleagues who visit him at home to cook, clean, do the laundry, and occasionally have sex with him. Lithuanians did not comment much on that perhaps because it did not stand out as significant: not to put too much emphasis on the sex part, as "there was no sex in the Soviet Union", the idea that a man living alone was incapable

of “taking care of himself” was quite widespread, and so such arrangements were rather prevalent. Younger generations of Gavelis’ Lithuanian readers would probably not hold such an opinion, but they likely see that detail as a sign of the time rather than literary misogyny. The American debate about who to blame for women’s oppression — author or character — misses an essential third option: it describes the society to which both author and character belong.

Another detail that stands out comes in Americans’ rather easy diagnosis of the main character with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a probably clinically correct conclusion to the extent that the diagnosis of a book character is at all possible. No Lithuanians attempted such a diagnosis, most importantly because PTSD is not a household term in Lithuania, which is something of a paradox: when psychotraumatological implications of Soviet occupation began to be studied about a decade after the first edition of the book appeared, the prevalence of PTSD was revealed to be extremely high. In fact, Danutė Gailienė quotes a study of Lithuanians and of Norwegians. Among groups of *repressed* Norwegians, PTSD symptoms were perceptible in 7–19% of cases, but in the *control* group of Lithuanian residents, isolated symptoms of PTSD occurred in 39% of cases (2008, 100). Gailienė and her colleagues have concluded the trauma was compounded by the fact that it was acknowledged by neither professionals nor society at large, and repressed persons experienced difficulties like limited opportunities for education and employment as well as persecutions and KGB interrogations (which makes the main character’s paranoia less unfounded) all the way until national independence. So while it is technically correct to describe Vargalys as suffering from PTSD, it would be much more precise to say that he is, in fact, not recovering from a trauma, but still being traumatized. It is not *post*-traumatic stress yet. Again, as with the misogyny, most Lithuanians did not focus too much on the character’s background because that is detail if not from their own lives, then from the lives of their parents or grandparents.

One final example of differing understandings comes through a quote from the *Kirkus Review* that was widely used for the promotion of the book and even printed on the cover: “Think of it as *The Matrix* behind the Iron Curtain” (*KIRKUS REVIEW* 2008). Only one American reader (“*KING RAT*” 2009) reacted to the actual fallacy here. In the 1999 film *The Matrix* by the Wachowski Brothers, when a person refuses to take the blue pill that prolongs life in a fantasy world in favor of the red pill, thus revealing the truth of the conspiracy, the rest of the plot is driven by the gradual revelation of ever deeper layers of truth. However, social research has laid bare

a very important characteristic of Soviet society: the ever-present mixture of untruth and half truth. Because official ideology obviously contradicted reality, hardly anyone believed it through and through but almost everyone usually acted as if they did as dissent was harshly punished. It was essentially impossible to live as one thought right, and constant compromise with one's own conscience was unavoidable. After discussing this social and moral conundrum, prominent researcher of Lithuanian Soviet and post-Soviet history Nerija Putinaitė concludes: "The Soviet norm of life was to mix truth with lie, erase the boundary between politics and social life, to resign oneself to double-thinking and double-acting" (2007, 301). The epoch described in *Vilnius Poker* might have actually been worse: with clear understanding of true and false, right and wrong already forgotten, but the dissatisfaction not yet ripe to produce major changes.³ *Vilnius Poker* is rather like taking both red and blue pills at the same time. The *Kirkus Review* quote may very well have placed the book in a sememic molecule for American readers where the novel was understood not as a literary representation of the conditions of a particular society, but as a social dystopia or sci-fi. Precise dates and place names didn't help—they are too unfamiliar for most Americans—nor did the unrealistic nature of many events and situations in the book. Americans also skimmed over long passages about national identity issues, only mentioning in passing the characters' "self-centered nationalism". In other words, they did not read the book in any political context at all, other than occasionally mentioning a vague impression that life in the Soviet Union was hard.

What compounds this interpretative problem is that most historical and political references in the book are entirely straightforward, written without secret codes and literary disguises, as was often the case with contemporary Lithuanian fiction. Consider the following:

Stalin's ultimatum to Lithuania is a classic example of *Their* pathologic: either Lithuania will let the Soviet Army divisions in to guard the Soviet Army divisions that are already in Lithuania, or the Soviet Army divisions will march into Lithuania without Lithuania's compliance. Total freedom to pick whatever your heart desires. The implied alternative—forceful resistance—circumspectly annihilated: the leader of Lithuania's army has long since been bought off. Lithuania was ruined when it let the first five Russian soldiers in, when Vilnius, thanks to the

3. For details of the late-Soviet period see YURCHAK 2005.

generous father of the people, Stalin, rode into Lithuania like a giant Trojan horse.

Vilnius, it's Vilnius again!

(GAVELIS 2009, 148)

The passage, entirely factual, could very well come from a well written history textbook. There is nothing to decode here, it can be taken at face value, and simple googling (as per the translator's suggestion) would eliminate any doubts as to its realism, if such a need were felt because of the absurdity of the situation described. So why did the American readers ignore the historical/political message so completely?

It is important to note that American readers might not have ignored that message, but simply omitted reference to it in their reading protocols. In point of fact, while Lithuanian readers implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the importance of the book as an historical document, they too refrain from providing greater detail for an in-depth historical/political reading. The political message might simply be too obvious to warrant a mention in Lithuanian reactions, and a more sophisticated reading is just too much effort for a book review or a blog entry. Therefore, the possibility that at least some of the Americans felt similarly and chose to discuss other issues and perceived messages exists.

Nevertheless, the desire to tell "our side of the story" is implicit throughout the book. The political passages almost always contrast Lithuanians to outsiders: "a thriving Englishman" (165), "the calm Swede sitting next to a fireplace in Stockholm and smoking a good pipe" (193), or even "people who live in free countries" (250). Gailienė's research (2008, 104–06; also see 120–36 for detailed discussion of acknowledgement of Communist regime traumas) indicates that acknowledgement of trauma and repression is also an essential part of recovery for both individuals and societies. *Vilnius Poker* could have been a perfect candidate for the "Lithuanian story project", even though the idea is hardly ever expressed explicitly. So why does it seem to fail so miserably?

For one thing, perhaps it is not failing at all. On the contrary, the inability to identify with the characters by an American (or otherwise Western) audience was, in fact, foreseen in the main character's thoughts on free people:

[. . .] somewhere there still are all kinds of Swiss or Swedes, who at least already know that it's inadmissible to admit, even for a second, that you are NOTHING. And to save them too is essential, because they have

too much faith in themselves, they think there's no way the fate of Spain in the Middle Ages or Atlantis could happen to them. Those naive people! (194)

However, it could also be a matter of the sememic molecule in which the book is framed. The American readers saw the quote comparing *Vilnius Poker* to *The Matrix* on the cover, and that provided them with a “sci-fi” framework of reference. Meanwhile, the historian and Soviet scholar Tomas Vaiseta (2008) provides a very successful historical reading, covering both the political/social situation and the inner state of the main character. But for that he requires a “key”, which he finds in *The Captive Mind*, one of the earliest and most influential reflections on the situation of the intellectuals in a totalitarian society, the Stalinist regime in particular, by Nobel prize-winning Polish-Lithuanian writer and thinker Czeslaw Milosz: Vaiseta interprets the main character in terms of Milosz’s concept of “Ker-man”, a practice of adjusting to a hostile regime by paying lip service to it, but at the same time maintaining “inner freedom”. While it might seem like a pragmatic solution to a difficult situation, Milosz sees this practice as morally harmful, as it involves hypocrisy and also pride in the feeling of superiority that stems from it.⁴

Perhaps when lacking advance knowledge and/or experience of the original context of a book, readers are likely to frame their understanding in the most readily available sememic molecule to them, and thus can be guided to adhere to a particular one using paratextual material, e.g. promotional quotes, as they are not very much inclined to search for more varied sememic molecules themselves. In the case of *Vilnius Poker*, the sememic molecule most readily available came from the promotional quote referring to *The Matrix*, thus the prevalent reading was in the framework of “sci-fi/social dystopia”. However, had the quote referred to research on the psychological impact of the life in a totalitarian regime on individuals, the more prevalent reading might have been more clinical and incorporated the sememic molecule of “psychotraumatology/PTSD”. Or if the book would have been promoted with a different quote from the same review in *Kirkus*—“Gavelis’ vision, prescient in several respects and perhaps absurd in others, recalls both the alternate worlds of Stanislas Lem (and, for that matter, Richard Price) and the acerbity of Vilnius-born Czeslaw Milosz”, the historical reading would have likely been much more foregrounded in the sememic molecule of “human condition in totalitarian

4. For details, see MIŁOSZ 1981, 54–84.

society”. Neither reading is entirely “wrong”, as the book itself provides grounds for all of them. But it may just be possible that the translator’s and her publisher’s decision to trust her readers’ ability to comprehend and clarify the book for themselves is much more charged than may appear at first sight. While it would not be fair to say that the Americans “got the book wrong”, or “didn’t get it at all”, they seem to have jumped at the most readily available framework. If other frameworks would have been provided for them equally readily, it is possible to hope that their readings would be more varied and more contextualized.

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