

History, Memory and Nostalgia in Literature and Culture

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Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
<i>Remembrance of Journeys Past: Nostalgia, Melancholy and the Duty of Memory in Contemporary British Travel Books</i>	1
Jan Borm	
Beyond Nostalgia: Notes on History and Memory of the Soviet Era in Lithuanian Postcolonial Fiction.....	14
Almantas Samalavičius	
“The Past Is A Foreign Country”: On the Nostalgia of Literature.....	25
Eric Sandberg	
Memory, Identity and Displacement in <i>Heshel’s Kingdom</i> by Dan Jacobson.....	38
Irena Ragaišienė	
Personal Landscape: Ford Madox Ford, War, and the Mind	54
Andrea Rummel	
“Where is the Place Where it All Really Happened?”: Lost Landscapes in the Poetry of Lars Gustafsson.....	65
Maria Freij	
<i>I Mourn Thee Now: Nostalgia in John Banville’s Novel The Sea</i>	81
Linara Bartkuvienė	
Liars, Similes and Story-tellers in <i>The Blue-Guitar</i> (2015) by John Banville: Anamnesis and Forgery	103
Thierry Robin	
Devaluating Testimony: The Unreliability of Memory and the Writing of History in Stan Douglas’s <i>Klatsassin</i>	124
Maria Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou	

Postmemory and Copresence in Lisa Appignanesi and Emilia Degenius: Life Writing of the Polish Diaspora.....	136
Elizabeth Kella	
Whose Memory? Contemporary Narratives of the Japanese American World War II Internment.....	157
Lena Ahlin	
History, (Non)Memory and the Ideological Uses of Genre: Alternate Scenarios and Dystopian Visions.....	173
Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż	
Material Reflections: The Scope of Memory in Peter Carey's <i>Oscar and Lucinda</i>	189
Rūta Šlapkauskaitė	
Forgetting Or Making To Forget: Memory, Trauma and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>The Buried Giant</i>	213
Deimantas Valančiūnas	
A Matter of Life and Death: Mr Darcy and Memory in P.D. James's <i>Death Comes To Pemberley</i>	229
Renata Zsamba	
The Second Eric Sanderson: Multi-Textuality, Identity and Memory in Hall's <i>The Raw Shark Texts</i>	241
Dorisa D. Costello	
The Witch and the Memory in Terry Pratchett's <i>Tiffany Aching</i> Series.....	256
Olena Tykhomyrova	
Views on Racial Categorization in William Faulkner's and Kathryn Stockett's Novels.....	264
Ingrida Eglė Žindžiuvienė and Teodor Mateoc	
Contributors.....	288

FOREWORD

The eve of the new age has alerted us to the conflicted nature of historical memory that defined the 20th century while simultaneously assaulting us with new historical upheavals that demand responsibility and critical consideration. Roland Barthes's concept of historical discourse being a form of ideological elaboration, an *imaginary* elaboration, presupposes the assumption that it might not be problematic to distort and falsify history, to imprint subjective opinions and handy interpretations on the popular imagination. As the historical text bears traces of the writing subject, the element of deception is remarkable, thus historical memory easily lends itself to forgery and false or at least subjective projections. History, memory can easily become a field and a tool of political manipulations, a playground to exercise ideological and social power. Records of historical experience and historical negotianism have been shown to be inextricably bound to power structures, institutional dynamics, currents of globalization, social dreams, and personal desires.

So how do we think about the past, about history, about memory, how does memory function? Is history an objective account, a collection of dry reliable facts? Or is it an imaginative narrative, tinged with nostalgia, a projection of our wishful thinking, the workings of our subjective perceptions and attitudes, states of mind?

The essays in this volume focus on the relevance of the past to the present and future in terms of the shifting attitudes to personal and collective experiences that have shaped dominant Western critical discourses about history, memory and nostalgia. What theoretical frameworks lend themselves best to the study of historical complexities and emotional ambiguities that respond to them? How do we grasp the rhythms and forms of longing? How does nostalgia unfold with regard to space and time? The scholars take issue with the epistemological, hermeneutic, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of the representational practices through which we revisit and revise the meaning of the past. Their essays collected in this volume deal with diverse thematic subjects, particularly focusing on history as narrative, alternative histories, memory, the discourse of nostalgia, the Proustian search for lost time, identity and historical agency, trauma.

Regina Rudaitytė

REMEMBRANCE OF JOURNEYS PAST:
NOSTALGIA, MELANCHOLY AND THE DUTY
OF MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH
TRAVEL BOOKS

JAN BORM

Memory is perhaps not surprisingly a central notion in contemporary travel writing. There are a number of reasons for that including the fact that travel writers often go on journeys in the footsteps of someone nowadays, possibly retracing their itinerary or discussing it in their own writing. Travelogues are also frequently used to note change, both internal and external. Thirdly, writing about one's own journeying is an act of memory in a way, even if the British author Jonathan Raban (b. 1942) likes to radically distinguish between travel itself and the preparation of a manuscript: "Writing—real writing, in the iron discipline of a book—is the mirror opposite of travelling. A book is a strictly subordinated world. Its logic, of symbol and metaphor, is at once tantalizingly suggestive and ruthlessly exclusive" (Raban 2012: 234-5). But the process of leaving out bits and pieces probably starts earlier in most cases, during the note taking. Having little to say about Belgrade in his well-known travel book *L'usage du monde* [1963], the Swiss author Nicolas Bouvier (1929-1998) remarks that he was not able to say a lot about the city since he had been busy feeling happy there all the time¹, adding that one cannot be judge of one's own wasted time or if one wasted one's time. *Le temps perdu*—the allusion to Marcel Proust's famous novel is manifest and clearly hints at the problematic role of *memory* in travel writing. Writing up travel is about remembering it all and trying to make parts of it come alive on page within

¹ Nicolas Bouvier, *L'usage du monde* [1963], Paris: Payot, 1992, p. 44: (à Belgrade) "Si je n'étais pas parvenu à y écrire grand-chose, c'est qu'être heureux me prenait tout mon temps. D'ailleurs, nous ne sommes pas juges du temps perdu." – "The reason why I did not manage to write much there was that feeling happy was taking up all of my time. Besides, we are not judges of wasted time" (my translation).

a framework that imposes not only selection—after all memory tends to be selective—but re-composition to make elements fit into an aesthetic whole if one agrees with David Lodge in considering the contemporary travelogue as a non-fiction novel of sorts (Lodge 1997: 8). This central and complex role of *memory* in the travel book also becomes immediately apparent if one looks at the genre's history. Countless travelogues deal with the author's pilgrimage to a country or a place, such as the Holy Land for instance, or the place where family members died in deportation like Finns, Lithuanians and Poles in Siberia to name but a few examples. An author might also want to reach a destination dreamed off since childhood like Bruce Chatwin (1940-1989) in Patagonia, as we will see below. Travel and writing about it may be a means of *chasse spleen* – to free oneself from all-invasive melancholia like Robert Burton tried to in his monumental *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a text we will also return to below. Grand Tours were undertaken to see the most famous remains of Antiquity. Ethnographers have been obliged time and again to conclude that they have come almost too late to see a culture alive and that it is their duty to remind and to alert readers of this sad state of affairs—a trope known as *ethnographic mourning*. Finally, one could argue that a *primitivist* stance is partly an effort to remember earlier, supposedly happier days. Be that as it may, *memory* is clearly one of the key vectors of travel writing. If memory is identity, as Julian Barnes' narrator suggests in *England, England*,² and given the importance of memory in travel, it follows that identity issues also play a key-role in travel literature. This may concern both personal and collective history, as well as the emotions, ideas and memories or souvenirs that come with places we are going through or remembering. In this chapter I will argue that the remembrance of one's own childhood, the sense of restlessness owing to feelings of melancholy, if not nostalgia, as well as the idea of a "duty to remind readers" of certain facts and figures are the three principal manifestations of memory in contemporary travel books. As we will see, these themes are highly prominent in a number of important works published since the 1970s up to the point of making us consider memory as one of the central motifs in contemporary travel writing.

From memory to nostalgia

One of the most famous British travelogues to have been published in the last 40 years is Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* [1977]. The memorable

² Julien Barnes, *England, England*: "Since memory is identity" (p. 251).

opening section of the book is preceded by an epigraph quoting in the French original some lines from Blaise Cendrars' long poem *Prose du Transsibérien* [1913]: "*Il n'y a plus que la Patagonie, la Patagonie,/ Qui convienne à mon immense tristesse...*", introducing the notion of (immense) sadness. The narrative then starts off with a childhood memory of the author's: "In my grandmother's dining-room there was a glass-fronted cabinet and in the cabinet a piece of skin. It was a small piece only, but thick and leathery, with strands of coarse, reddish hair. It was stuck to a card with a rusty pin. On the card was some writing in faded black ink, but I was too young then to read." (Chatwin 1979: 6). The author then goes on to remember a conversation with his grand-mother, explaining in a humorous vein that his grandmother thought this piece of skin to stem from a brontosaurus whereas we are really dealing with a giant sloth, an extinct animal that used to live in a giant cave, Chatwin's ultimate destination in Patagonia to find a replacement for the skin that had been lost since. The resonance of these opening lines is particularly strong if one connects them with the rest of the book. The glass-fronted cabinet is thus less to be seen as indicative of realism or an *effet de réel* of sorts, as it were, but rather as a way of introducing the theme of perception and possibly distance (in time). The reddish hair somehow goes with the rusty pin, the notion of rust suggesting the passing of time (from earliest age to the moment of composition), but also the souvenir of long bygone days, enhanced by the image of faded ink. Travelling Patagonia thus becomes a way of trying to recover if not one's childhood, at least some of one's own earliest memories. "I Always Wanted to Go to Patagonia" is the title of an autobiographical essay Chatwin published later³. To what extent this is really true shall be of no concern here. More importantly, the giant sloth motif at the beginning is the device Chatwin found for introducing the quest theme (i.e. the journey to Patagonia is partly-undertaken to find a replacement for the lost piece of skin), a way of structuring this highly

³ "I always wanted to go to Patagonia" (*New York Review of Books*, 1983), reprinted in Chatwin 1997: 3-14. Here is the passage explaining where the phrase stems from, pp. 13-4: "One afternoon in the early 70s, in Paris, I went to see the architect and designer, Eileen Gray, who at the age of ninety-three thought nothing of a fourteen-hour working day. She lived in the rue Bonaparte, and in her salon hung a map of Patagonia, which she had painted in gouache.

'I've always wanted to go there,' I said. 'So have I,' she added. 'Go there for me.' I went. I cabled the *Sunday Times*: 'Have Gone to Patagonia'. In my rucksack I took Mandelstam's *Journey to Armenia* and Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Six months later I came back with the bones of a book that, this time, did get published."

original narrative. Indeed, Chatwin ended up leaving out most of the parts concerning himself that had featured in the first draft of the narrative described to his parents as “a 3-inch pie of manuscript, much of which will have to be scrapped when I come to the revision.”⁴ In the same message he also alludes to the part of his book that deals with one of his distant relatives, the sailor Charlie Milward, who had spent some years in Patagonia, written stories about it which partly feature in Chatwin’s book, and sent the piece of giant cloth alluded to in the beginning of the text. Sailor Milward is obviously part of the memory set if one can call it such in the narrative, the theme being enhanced by this allusion to Milward’s own apparent homesickness or at least fond memories of home: “The extraordinary thing about Milward is that he could never shake off Birmingham. The house in Punta Arenas is pure Edgbaston arts and crafts.”⁵ But according to Chatwin, Milward must have been fond of Patagonia too, judging by the objects he collected, including the animal skin he sent back home.

Colin Thubron (b. 1939), author of more than ten travel accounts and President of the Royal Society of Literature, has also recently reflected on the function of these remains of the past in his elegiac *To a Mountain in Tibet*: “My feet slow on the trail. But my memories come too hard for quiet thought. With the death of a last parent, material things—old correspondence, a dilapidated house, a pair of slippers, emerge like orphans to enshrine the dead. My mother threw away nothing” (Thubron 2012: 54). Thubron’s itinerary is a pilgrimage to some holy places in order to pay homage to his family members who disappeared in recent times. It is striking to note how memories here seem to be invasive, slowing down the traveller’s pace, demanding attention to the point of making Thubron reflect on the very question of what should be kept and what the role of the keeper is: “How to decide what is to survive, what is to perish? The value of things no longer belongs to cost or beauty, but only to memory” (Thubron 2012: 54). Though the objects might facilitate a return into one’s own childhood, this inner experience may be somewhat burdensome: “The past drops away into the waste-paper basket and oblivion, and in this monstrous disburdening, grief returns you to a kind of childish dependence. You sift and preserve (for whom?) and cling to trivia. You have become the guardian of their past, even its recreator” (Thubron 2012:

⁴ Bruce Chatwin, *Under the Sun: The Letters of Bruce Chatwin* (ed. Elizabeth Chatwin and Nicholas Shakespeare). London: Vintage, 2011, p. 249-251 (letter to Charles and Margharita Chatwin from Fishers Island/New York, 25 Aug 1975), p. 249.

⁵ *Id.*

55). The image of the guardian betrays a sense of static memory to be set off against the idea that memories then also become the object of re-workings, a creative process of recomposing the past, a bit like the travelogue resetting the experience of the traveller within the framework of a sustained narrative. The idea of travel permitting oneself to recover a sense of one's own past is a frequent theme, even a common trope in contemporary travel writing as Jonathan Raban's and Redmond O'Hanlon's (b. 1947) accounts go to show. What, then, is the function of this *topos*? Arguably, the return to childhood in these texts could be seen as a reworking of the feeling of *nostos* that aches and propels the epic traveller in Antiquity, the term at the root of the notion of *nostalgia*—the longing for, yet impossible return to a former if not original and presumably happier state. Continued engagement with this idea may then lead to more or less prolonged pangs or even states of melancholia, the theme we presently turn to.

Of travel as a cure for melancholy

Having studied archaeology at Edinburgh University for a couple of years, Bruce Chatwin then worked on a book about nomadism he was originally thinking of calling *The Nomadic Alternative*⁶ and which he later presented as “a kind of ‘Anatomy of Restlessness’ that would enlarge on Pascal’s dictum about the man sitting quietly in a room” (Chatwin 1997: 12) since the notion of *restlessness* was the central object of his reflection in a manuscript that is extant but which he decided not to publish. In a letter to his friend Deborah Rogers written in 1987 he refers to what he calls his own “incurable restlessness” (Chatwin 2011: 493). The author was actually seriously ill at this stage, being infected with HIV. The term “incurable” may be a hint at his deplorable state at that moment but also no doubt alludes to the fact that he never stopped reflecting about the nature of nomadism and his own condition. The poet and Hellenist Peter Levi (1931-2000) paid homage to his friend as an excellent travel companion in the preface to the paperback edition of *The Light Garden of the Angel King: Journeys in Afghanistan*, an account originally published in 1972: “it will be obvious from every page of this book that I was extremely fortunate in the travelling companion I did have, Bruce Chatwin. Most of our best observations and all the best jokes were his; and it was he who was interested in nomads” (Levi 1984: 15). Chatwin had written himself a piece entitled “A Lament for Afghanistan”, his preface to

⁶ See his letter to Tom Mashler collected in Chatwin 1997: 75.

a new edition of Robert Byron's *Road to Oxiana* in 1981, a classic title first published in 1937 that counted among Chatwin's favourite travelogues. The term "lament" is telling. Chatwin is not only mourning the loss of Byron as he explicitly states in the text later collected in his volume *What Am I Doing Here* [1989], but also the days when travels in Afghanistan were still possible before the Soviet Union decided to invade the country.

Of course, Chatwin's emotion evokes the idea of nostalgia first: "But that day will not bring back the things we loved: the high, clear days and blue icecaps on the mountains" (Chatwin 1989: 293). It also needs to be linked with his most successful book *The Songlines* [1986], a reworking of several journeys to Australia into one narrative that he preferred not to call a travel book since the effort of reconstructing, not-to-say fictionalising, the experience of several trips into one whole was hard to pass off as an authentic account of one particular journey. Being ill while he was working on the book, Chatwin may have had a sense of running out of time. In any case, he decided to include a remarkable and highly original section entitled "From the Notebooks", running up to some 40 pages in the paperback edition (Chatwin 1987: 163-205), composed of quotes and his own comments and thoughts about human restlessness, taking as a starting point Blaise Pascal's famous reflection on man's incapacity to remain seated within a room for a sustained period of time: "'OUR NATURE LIES in movement; complete calm is death'" (Pascal quoted by Chatwin 1987: 163). The line is followed by a quote from Baudelaire's diaries: "'A study of the Great Malady; horror of home'", a comment by the narrator introducing the central theme: "The most convincing analysts of restlessness were often men who, for one reason or another, were immobilised: Pascal by stomach ailments and migraines, Baudelaire by drugs, St John of the Cross by the bars of his cell. There are French critics who would claim that Proust, the hermit of the cork-lined room, was the greatest of literary voyagers", two more reflections on obsessive *wanderlust* of some monks and even Petrarca, as well as a line from a letter written by Rimbaud: "'What am I doing here?'"

Chatwin's assembling of this material is worth commenting on at some length. In a letter to Murray and Margaret Bail written in February 1986, he referred to his work in process thus: "As for my own 'Awful Mess' I've now got to the critical stage in which there is a sudden shift from Australia, in order to answer Pascal's assertion about the man sitting quietly in a room. If it comes off, then I'm on the downward stretch. If not, then there's a real crisis" (Chatwin 2011: 435). He was obviously not the first author to have meditated and enlarged on Pascal's reflection. After

all, we find the same question in D.H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* [1921]: "Why can't one sit still?" (Lawrence 1981: 7), but Chatwin's efforts in trying to find answers or to make different voices answer one another are far more sustained, reflection, as we pointed out already, a lifelong concern, if not obsession to him. Indeed, Baudelaire's observation may be considered as an accurate description of Chatwin's own restlessness, changing homes frequently, preferring to write his manuscripts in the houses of friends and ironically ending up settling in a former school in Oxfordshire in a place called "Homer End". References to religious or spiritual wanderings are frequent in Chatwin's writing. The notebook section strikingly ends with a quote from St John Moscus' *Spiritual Meadow*, a famous text that William Dalrymple (b. 1965) draws on as the principal intertext of his travelogue *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* [1997]. As to Rimbaud's question, Chatwin decided to adapt it as a title for the last book he was able to put together, a collection of articles, essays and other pieces, unexpectedly leaving out the question mark in the title, however, to indicate that he was not referring to a moment of doubt but to a permanent state of affairs at a time when he was terminally ill. To return to Pascal once more, his remarks about the man in the room stem from a fragment of his *Pensées* entitled "Divertissement". Pascal argues that man's predicament of seeking to divert his mind from essential questions is the cause of much trouble in the world but Chatwin may well have engaged in Pascal's thoughts in view of his interest in nomads as opposed to settlers, repeatedly suggesting in his writing that health was in movement and many problems arising from people settling and possessing grounds and goods. In the notebooks section of the *Songlines* one notably finds the expression *solvitur ambulando* translated as "It is solved by walking" (Chatwin 1987: 171).

The project of writing an *anatomy of restlessness* and the idea of travel as a cure lead us to one of Chatwin's key references, Robert Burton's (1577-1640) monumental *Anatomy of Melancholy* [first edition 1621], a title that clearly inspired Chatwin for his own tentative effort. Robert Burton is introduced in the notebook section of the *Songlines* in the following terms: "sedentary and bookish Oxford don—devoted an immense amount of time and scholarship to showing that travel was not a curse, but a cure for melancholy: that is, for depressions brought on by settlement" (Chatwin 1987: 169). Burton did of course develop a number of remarks on the healing potential of travel, a relatively brave attempt given that Erasmus of Rotterdam still had felt the need a hundred years earlier to justify his own *wanderlust* in a very carefully-worded letter in order to

avoid being accused of inconstancy, if not idleness⁷. It might be worth remembering that Burton accounts for his own enterprise of writing on melancholy as the very cure for his own condition: “I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy” (Burton 2001: 20). Regarding the healing potential of peregrination, Burton observes that “there is nothing better than change of air in this malady” (Burton 2001: 62) or “no better physic for a melancholy man than change of air and variety of places, to travel abroad and see fashions” (Burton 2001: 67), recommending outdoor activities like hunting, hawking, fishing and different types of sport including football, but also “to make petty progress” (Burton 2001: 74), i.e. walking. In the notebook section Chatwin suggests the following etymology: “In Middle English, the word ‘progress’ meant ‘a journey’, particularly a ‘seasonal journey’ or ‘circuit’” (Chatwin 1987: 197). The desire for a change of place (or air) leads on to movement, walking to the journey and potentially – or even logically – to improvement if one admits that Chatwin thus manages to conjure up both the archaic and the modern sense of the term. Even if the author insists that “‘moral’ or ‘material’ forms of progress were unknown until the seventeenth century” (Chatwin: 1987: 197), the affirmation appears somewhat tongue-in-cheek since it seems hard to lose the modern sense from sight in the given context. Travel is supposed to be a means of curing many ills, including love-sickness (“Travel is an antidote to love” – Burton 2001: 199, more or less successful, see Eugene Onegin) and even for the armchair traveller there are pleasures to be got out of reading travel accounts (Burton 2001: 89).

⁷ In a letter to the humanist Marcus Laurinus dated April 5, 1518, Erasmus wonders to what extent travel may be seen as a form of inconstancy: “Quod si constantiae virtus in hoc sita est, vt quam diutissime locum eundem occupes, prima laus debetur saxis ac truncis arborum, proxima conchis ac spongiis. Non est in vicio commutare locum, sed perperam commutare vicium est.” See Erasmus of Rotterdam, letter to Marcus Laurinus, *Louvain*, 5 April 1518, in *The Complete Letters of Erasmus* (ed. P.S. Allen), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913 (re-issued 1992), p. 267. I have consulted Walter Köhler’s German edition of his letters: *Briefe* (ed. and tr. Walther Köhler), Wiesbaden: Dietrich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1947, p. 192: “Besteht die Tugend der Standhaftigkeit darin, solange wie möglich an einem Ort zu sitzen, so gebührt das erste Lob den Felsen und Baumstrünken, das nächste den Muscheln und Schwämmen. Es ist kein Laster, den Platz zu wechseln; aber zu unrecht ihn zu wechseln, ist ein Laster” – which I suggest to render in English as follows: “If the virtue of constancy consists in staying put in one place for as long as possible, praise should go first and foremost to rocks and tree trunks, then to mussels and mushrooms. There is nothing wrong with changing places, but to do so without justification is wrong indeed.”

What about Chatwin's own journey to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego? Did it bring a cure? Was it meant to have a healing purpose after all? As the author-narrator explains at the beginning of the text, the point was to find a replacement for the lost piece of giant sloth skin. These are the memorable terms in which Chatwin accounts for the apparently successful accomplishment of his own quest. The scene takes place at the cave – Cueva del Milodon – close to the fittingly named *Ultima Esperanza* or Last Hope Sound: "And then, poking out of a section, I saw some strands of the coarse reddish hair I knew so well. I eased them out, slid them into an envelope and sat down, immensely pleased. I had accomplished the object of this ridiculous journey. And then I heard voices, women's voices, voices singing: 'María... María... María...'" (Chatwin 1979: 182). The comic tone and the term "ridiculous" help to debunk the myth of the traveller as a kind of epic hero achieving his task. Still, the convention Chatwin set out to follow as a structuring device for his account has been respected – a masterstroke that announced a new, more nuanced approach of authors to their own journeys in writing. The cave is the one that Charlie Milward found the piece of skin in alluded to in the beginning, as Chatwin explains to John Kasmin in a message sent in 1975 (Chatwin 2011: 244). Whether he really did find a replacement there is somewhat beside the point. More importantly, his own achievement in reaching the cave is relativized. Chatwin's narrative is in fact largely dedicated to figures of exile he met in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, as well as the sad story (hence the epigraph) of the pure-blooded indigenous populations having completely disappeared—which leads us to the duty of memory.

Devoir de mémoire

Chatwin retraces a number of more or less famous itineraries, including the story of Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid in Patagonia, the history of the revolutionary movements of anarchists in southern Patagonia⁸ or his relation Charlie Milward. It may seem at first that the epigraph is a reference to Chatwin's own experience, feeling somewhat sad about the loss of his childhood, hence the prominent place given to the remembrance of the lost piece of skin at the beginning of the text. But as I have already pointed out above, this choice is mainly a way of structuring

⁸ Chatwin drew largely on the writings of the historian Oswaldo Bayer whose book *Los Vengadores de la Patagonia Trágica* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1972-4) he had reviewed for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1976, the review entitled "The Anarchists of Patagonia", collected in Chatwin 1997: 115-128.

the narrative. It becomes clear from what follows that the sadness is very largely related to the tragedy of the indigenous populations of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego having been either massacred by white settlers or died through contact with them, notably from infectious diseases. Chatwin's admiration for the Yaghans is manifest: "The Yaghans were born wanderers though they rarely wandered far. [...] The layers of metaphorical associations that made up their mental soil shackled the Indians to their homelands with ties that could not be broken. A tribe's territory, however uncomfortable, was always a paradise that could never be improved on" (Chatwin 1979: 130). Unfortunately, he is obliged to tell the sad story of a paradise lost. At the same time, introducing the notion of sadness—*tristesse*—in the epigraph is a way to acknowledge the impact of one of the most influential texts to have been published after the Second World War to alert public opinion about the tragic destiny of indigenous peoples around the world, Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous *Tristes Tropiques* [1955], with its famous opening line "I hate travelling and explorers" (Lévi-Strauss 1976: 15). Chatwin had attended Claude Lévi-Strauss' lecture in Oxford in 1973, the year the second English translation of *Tristes Tropiques* came out. Chatwin also sets out to "accuse" in Zola's fashion, notably when he tells the tale of one Alexander MacLennan, active in the region in the 1890s, the so-called "Red Pig" (Chatwin 1979: 111-12). In contrast, Chatwin narrates the story of Grandpa Felipe, presented as the last pure-blooded Yaghan left, thereby engaging in what is commonly called *ethnographic mourning* (I am the last one to witness/I have met the last survivor of etc.), a trope that brings us close to the idea of the *duty to remember*, a trope that is a powerful driving force in a number of contemporary travelogues.

Another striking example I would like to turn to at present is Colin Thubron's narrative *In Siberia* [1999]. The laconic title is an evident reminder of Chatwin's earlier book and may even be read as a kind of homage. Like Chatwin, though in a less persistent way, Thubron wonders what he is doing out there, in the vastness of Siberia. The opening chapter is entitled "Hauntings", introducing the theme of Siberia as a place of haunting memory, in the present case, the city of Yekaterinburg and the story of the last Russian Tsar having been shot there with his family, a place of memory (*lieu de mémoire*) the Russian authorities finally failed to eradicate from memory in recent years. Further down the line, Thubron stops over in Omsk, an infamous halt on the way into deportation for Dostoevsky and later Solzhenitsyn (Thubron 1999: 52). He is systematically interested in the different layers of memory relating to a particular place or what is called in French the thickness —*l'épaisseur*—of a particular memory

place, as he does here in relation to Omsk: "Next morning, outside the big, unlovely cathedral, which in Stalin's day had been a cinema, I found a coach-load of pilgrims setting off for a rural monastery. They welcomed me on board" (Thubron 1999: 52). The scene is not only factual, but also symbolical, the narrator thus naming what he had engaged in right from the start, a kind of pilgrimage to a number of sinister-sounding Siberian sites such as the former gulag of Vorkuta, accounting both for the history of the places visited and the remains still to be seen: "But the town was slipping away, and before us unrolled a ghastly no man's land. For miles its grasslands bunched and undulated with scars of vanished buildings; and some forgotten war, it seemed, had littered its surface with scrap-iron and ruin" (Thubron 1999: 38). The term "scars" is revealing. Remembering the wounds of the past may not be a way of healing them but paying respect to those unfortunate enough to have died during wars forgotten since. The thought of so many dead souls gives the traveller the impression of moving among a largely anonymous crowd of ghosts: "I tried to remember any individual who had died there – a Mandelstam, a Babel. He might have stirred some sharp, particular loss. But I knew of no one. Only a nameless nation of the dead, whom I could not quite separate from its persecutors" (Thubron 1999: 38). The traveller's predicament is manifest: how to react to so much suffering and account for it? Talking to a former inmate, Thubron notes, or rather, admits: "I felt like a voyeur, ashamed, but I ask: 'What was it like, the work?' [...]. She starts to rock a little on the sofa, backwards and forwards, heavily. Her head turns to the television, where the soap opera is proceeding among yachts and tuxedos. 'It was hardest when we built the roads. So many died!'" (Thubron 1999: 44). The contrast between the images on television and the lady's memories is moving, illustrating Thubron's candid approach and subtle narrative technique. Like Chatwin, Thubron's narrator is clearly concerned with lending voice mainly to the other, thereby reducing the importance of his own presence, an attempt at some form of reflexivity to break away from the convention of largely focusing on the traveller as the central hero in travel accounts of the previous age.

Engagement with the multiple layers of the past also characterises Sara Wheeler's circumpolar account *The Magnetic North*, parts of which are dedicated to the Russian Far North. Once again, it is important to remind readers of the changing fortune of a particular place, in this case the famous Solovki Monastery on the Solovetsky islands in the White Sea. Wheeler has chosen this emblematic place of Russian faith as the final destination and the last, soothing symbol to take away back home, as well as a sign of hope. The chapter is entitled "The Spirit Lives: The Arctic in

European Russia". An excerpt from Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* serves as the book's epigraph. This is how she portrays this exceptional place of memory today: "The monks have returned to chant, perhaps for the forgiveness of others. Just as dignified integrity outlasted cultural destruction among the Inuit, a sense of quiet redemption lived on among the bone yards of Stalin's White Sea camp. It was a good place to end" (Wheeler 2009: 303). Here, the duty of memory opens the road to a way of redemption.

What are the principal functions, then, of memory in contemporary travel books? Travelogues are no longer about geographical discovery, though exploration does continue to represent one of its themes. The personal dimension of discovering different parts of the world for oneself apart, travellers invariably revisit places more or less frequently described by their predecessors, introducing factors of change. This may include the description of people, monuments and phenomena before they might disappear, that-is-to-say *ethnographic mourning*. Similarly, alerting the audience about contemporary problems and potential threats such as climate change as well as the dangers of oblivion (of one's own and other people's past) is a powerful vector in contemporary travel writing. At a moment when news are globalized and increasingly poorer in terms of cultural expertise reflected, it is crucial to have these authors voicing their remembrance of things past, representing various—if not thick—layers that the memory of a place consists of. Travelogues too are a "medium of collective memory"⁹, to borrow a phrase from Herbert Grabes, and they continue to play an important role as one of the principal means to represent diversity.

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⁹ Herbert Grabes, "Introduction", in Herbert Grabes (ed.), *Literature, Literary History and Cultural Memory*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, "REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature 21", 2005, p. xiv.

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BEYOND NOSTALGIA: NOTES ON HISTORY AND MEMORY OF THE SOVIET ERA IN LITHUANIAN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION

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The Curious Case of Lithuanian Postcolonialism

Suggestions and eventually some attempts to apply the theoretical/analytical framework developed by postcolonial studies to the study of (post)Soviet Lithuanian literature and culture were made at least as early as 1996¹; however, it took more than a decade before these scholarly interests were finally legitimized both internationally and locally. Among other things, the publication of a large collection of academic articles under the title of *Baltic Postcolonialism*, edited by American Lithuanian literary scholar Violeta Kelertas, ended a period of prolonged hostility (not to mention openly negative views) to this approach in Lithuania and dispelled suspicion and skepticism among those scholars who preferred to limit the interpretations of postcolonialism to geographical areas like Africa or Asia previously dominated by European colonial powers. As any serious student of postcolonialism knows, these studies underwent their own evolutionary process and shifted an initial fixation that was exclusively on cases of “classical” colonialism. Their mental geography expanded, finally embracing societies that were initially excluded from postcolonial scrutiny. Edward W. Said was among the very few Western scholars who drew the attention of students of literature to the fact that imperial Russia was in fact a colonial enterprise involved in colonial activities in the Caucasus, Central Asia, as well as Eastern Europe. Though he never

¹ See, for example, my article “In quest of Postcommunist Studies” published in Lithuanian as “Postkomunizmo studijų klausimu“, *Kultūros barai* 11 (1996): 11-14 and later reprinted in Almantas Samalavičius. *Kaita ir tęstinumas: kultūros kritikos esė*, Vilnius: Kultūros barai (2008): 11-20.

focused on an analysis of Soviet or czarist Russian colonialism, in his renowned and influential book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said made a brief comment suggesting that Russia was not at all “tax exempt” from colonial ideology or policies. In the introduction to this well-known book, Said emphasized that

there are several empires that I do not discuss: the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian, the Ottoman, and the Spanish and Portuguese. These omissions, however, are not at all meant to suggest that Russia domination of Central Asia and Eastern Europe <...> have been either benign (and hence approved of) or way less imperialistic.²

Furthermore, he noted that Russia

acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence. Unlike Britain or France, which jumped thousands of miles beyond their own borders to other continents, Russia moved to swallow whatever land or people stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving farther east and south.³

Literary scholar Violeta Kelertas in an article published as early as 1999, gave a timely notice that

Although much has been written about various locations and forms of postcolonialism, the empire that constituted the Soviet Union has been little discussed in these terms and Baltic scholars, both in and outside the countries themselves, are only now beginning to realize the utility of this approach.⁴

Though some Lithuanian researchers, including the author of this article, had long realized the “utility of this approach” as Kelertas calls it, it was nevertheless not at all easy for Lithuanian postcolonialism to make its way into the geographical realm of postcolonial studies. As Karlis Račevskis has insisted, the inclusion of the Baltic societies into a category covered by postcolonial theory/studies was somewhat delayed for numerous reasons and, according to him,

² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxiii.

³ Ibid., 10.

⁴ Kelertas, “*Perception of the Self and the Other in Lithuanian Postcolonial Fiction*”, 9.

What complicates matters even further in the case of the Baltic States is that leftist critical theory in general is implicated in a long history of misperception or miscomprehension of the Soviet system. In this sense it could indeed be said that the Baltic countries have been doubly disadvantaged: victims of World War II, they were further victimized by the Cold War that followed, since the latter prevented them from being seen as the victims of the former. In terms of the Cold War, East Europeans belonged to the political right by definition and therefore count on little sympathy from the left. Thus, for a long time, the Soviet Union benefited from a curious sort of blindness afflicting a good many Western intellectuals. So much hope and ideological capital had been invested in the idea of a bright future for humankind, for which the USSR seemed to stand, that many thinkers simply ignored or refused to accept the evidence of such a well-documented fact as the Soviet slave labor system.⁵

American postcolonial scholar David Chioni Moore was among those theorists who strongly supported the thesis of the legitimacy of Baltic postcolonial studies in an influential article published in the proceedings of the Modern Language Association and eventually re-published in the collection of *Baltic Postcolonialism*. According to Moore, who discussed various historical forms of colonialism,

if “dynastic” colonization cannot properly characterize the Russo-Soviet experience, it might be profitable, I would argue, to consider the Baltic and Central European states as a distinct *fourth* case I call *reverse-cultural colonization*. Once again, the standard Western story about colonization is that it is always accompanied by orientalization, in which the colonized are seen by their masters as passive, ahistorical, feminine, or barbaric. However, in Russian-Central European colonization this relation is reversed, because for at least several centuries Russia has, again, been saddled with the fear or belief that it was culturally inferior to the West. *Mittel-European* capitals such as Budapest, Berlin and Prague were therefore seen in Russia, at least by some, as colonial *prizes*, rather than as burdens needing “civilizing” from their occupiers. In return, the Baltic and Central Europeans often saw the colonizing Russo-Soviets as “Asiatics.”⁶

Furthermore, Moore has rightly emphasized that there had been a basis of colonization on other than “a Western model” and, accordingly,

the Russian colonial experience embodies yet another difference from that of France and Britain: a rhetoric of revenge or, indeed, return. Only several

⁵ Račevskis, “Toward a Postcolonial Perspective of the Baltic States”, 171.

⁶ Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet”, 26.

centuries before, Muscovy was a Mongol vassal state, and Central Asia's khans held European slaves into the 19th century. For those who would characterize Russians as different from the peoples to their south and east, the 19th century Central Asian colonizations thus become revenge. But for those other who held that Russia was already partly "Asiatic", from Russian Eurasianists and Scythianists to Western European Russian-orientalists, Russia's Central Asian conquest constituted a *return*.⁷

Quite interestingly, the rhetoric of revenge is currently once again exploited in various contexts by propaganda channels of Putin's regime in Russia that does not seem to give-up its centuries-long imperial policies.

No matter how or in which analytical terms one chooses to interpret the form of czarist and eventually Soviet colonization in the Baltic region, it is obvious that occupation lasting for more than half a century until the spectacular fall of the Soviet empire in 1990, can be rightfully considered as a form of colonization, including the variety of cultural and social consequences that followed. Despite occasional attempts to debunk the fact of the colonization of the Baltic states, the latest of which is the statement of Russian literary scholar Evgeny Dobrenko, who in recent debates at a scholarly conference in Vilnius, fiercely refused to admit that Soviet Russia instead of "liberating" had in fact occupied and then colonized the Baltic states and Lithuania.⁸ Dobrenko's passionate but equally weak arguments that during the later Soviet era a number of Soviet Russian citizens somewhat enviously viewed Lithuania and other Baltic states as a "Western" part of the Soviet domain, in my opinion, can be taken as a kind of pro-Soviet ideology in disguise rather than serious analytical statements containing any historical validity. Quite interestingly, these remarks correspond to ambiguous statements of other prominent Russian intellectuals, like, for example, the film-maker Alexander Sokurov who during his recent visit to Lithuania insisted that Lithuania submitted itself to the Soviet Union rather than being occupied. Such curious statements in themselves could be an interesting focus for a more elaborate study; however, the scope of this paper does not allow for further elaboration on this highly interesting subject.

It should be added, though, that in addition to the scholarly activities of Baltic scholars in different geographic locations—the US, Canada as

⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸ See the opinion presented by professor Evgeny Dobrenko in a closing discussion of the international conference "The Literary Field Under the Communist Regime", held in Vilnius in 2015 and published as "A Discussion on Methodologies for Researching Soviet Literary Space". In *Colloquia* 35 (2015): 147-162.

well as Eastern Europe—the present legitimacy of Baltic postcolonialism was strongly supported by the development of Irish postcolonial studies. Both countries have a lot in common; among many other things both were colonized by their very close and stronger neighbor. Some of the Irish scholars working in the field of postcolonial studies have taken into consideration that it was Russia that introduced colonial regimes in the Baltic area immediately after it occupied the region in 1940, eventually lost it to Germany and won it back towards the end of World War II.⁹

Nostalgia: Real, Imagined or Misconceived?

Quite recently, there have been some repetitive arguments about the more and more widespread nostalgia for the Soviet period among Lithuanian citizens, especially among the sociologists and anthropologists researching the post-Soviet Lithuanian space. Based on a certain amount of field-research, these studies suggest that Lithuanians are longing for at least some realities and certainties of the Soviet era and this longing, among other things, is expressed by the labels used in present manufacturing and the advertising of various goods, for example, food.¹⁰ Anthropologist Neringa Klumbytė, who teaches anthropological disciplines at Miami University, Ohio, USA, in her recent study based on field-research done in Lithuania a few years ago, strongly emphasizes the phenomenon of the so-called “Soviet sausage renaissance” as witnessed by the popularity of this brand in proportion to other brands of the same daily foods offered by shopping malls in Lithuania. In addition, her thesis is supported by the sociologist Irena Šutinienė, who has been conducting ongoing research at the Lithuanian Center for Social Studies into the collective and cultural memory of the Soviet period. Recently, she has maintained that

Qualitative studies of postcommunist nostalgia prove that people are longing not for the very reality of the Communist period, but for those ideas and fantasies that structured it in the past, hopes, discourses and feelings that while being projected into the Communist past provide meaning to their experience of the present.¹¹

⁹ Chamberlain, *Decolonization*, 75.

¹⁰ See Klumbytė, “The Soviet Sausage Renaissance”, *American Anthropologist* 112 (1), (2010): 22-37.

¹¹ For more detailed arguments see Šutinienė, “Sovietmečio atmintis šiuolaikinėje Lietuvoje: ambivalentiškumas ar nostalgija“, *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmai* 32 (2013): 152-175.

These inquiries encourage one to raise a question whether residents of contemporary Lithuania exhibit a truly nostalgic attitude toward their Soviet past or if this alleged “nostalgia”—a strange longing for the certainties of the Soviet epoch—masks their ambiguous feelings toward the lack of prosperity in their present lives? This leads us to another question—whether the thesis of nostalgia is supported by Lithuanian literature? It is perhaps worthwhile to examine whether feelings of this kind of nostalgia are exhibited in contemporary Lithuanian literature; the more so that literature is among other things sometimes viewed as a kind of reflexive and imaginative “social mirror” of a particular historical period. Though such an inquiry perhaps requires more detailed study than the scope of the present article can allow, I will permit myself the limitation of focusing only on a few (selective) examples of contemporary Lithuanian prose dealing with the realities of the post-Soviet era as well as with memories of the Soviet one. Though I have no intention to debunk the thesis of anthropologists and sociologists looking into the subject of nostalgia, my attempt is to find out whether this phenomenon is really as profound and lasting as some anthropologists and sociologists seem to suggest.

History and Memory in Lithuanian (post) Soviet Prose

A number of Lithuanian writers provided powerful literary images of the Soviet colonization even before the collapse of the Soviet regime took place, and even without ever referring to the phenomenon of colonization as such. Novels like *The Enchanted City* by Romualdas Lankauskas published as early as 1988, or *Vilnius Poker* by Ričardas Gavelis published in 1989, among many other things, were literary commentaries on the Soviet era. None of these novels exhibited any feelings of nostalgia for the system slowly falling to pieces in the late 1990's. Instead they dealt with how power and prolonged colonization distorts almost all aspects of the subjugated and colonized society. Both visions, however, were somewhat different. Lankauskas's short yet impressive novel written in an Orwellian manner was extremely ironic; Gavelis's novel was far more gloomy and depressing, suggesting that decline and degradation captures all of those involved in the colonial regime: both the perpetrators and the victims suffer from a distorted political, social, and cultural malaise. Moreover, as one can deduce from the narrative provided by Gavelis, no one is a hero, since even the main protagonist VV (Vytautas Vargalys) or his *vital élan*—his senior teacher and *guru* Gediminas Riauba—can hardly aspire to this status. Like the other characters of *Vilnius Poker*, they embody the “dark side” of the inner self. This is especially true in the narrative associated

with VV: though he himself was tortured and perhaps even maimed by the KGB interrogators, his own attitude towards other fellow humans or even those closest to him, like his lover Stefa, is built on an unequal and even a sort of masochistic relationship. Through its rich imagery, *Vilnius Poker* reveals a very vivid panorama of the Soviet era, though mostly represented by the decaying city of Vilnius that has ceased to contain symbols of a former glory; instead, these symbols have started to represent the city's ultimate fall portrayed by its total loss of masculine powers. The body of the city in *Vilnius Poker* "comes to a stop", it "turns into stone", "stinks" or is even presented to the reader as "an old depraved exhibitionist", "a corpse in whose entrails the worms probably still crawl". The novel's Vilnius no longer boasts its glorious architectural symbols; on the contrary, a structure like the once famous Gediminas Tower is described as a "short blunt phallus". And even its main river—the Neris—is described as "the river of memory"; nevertheless,

It remembers nothing itself; it just carries other memories. It's not true that you can't wade into the same river's stream twice. Heraclitus was mistaken, or more accurately he had some other city in mind, certainly not this river. The water of the Neris turns and turns in a circle, you can wade into the stream many times. You can scoop up a handful of water that saw the founding of Vilnius, drink a gulp the Iron Wolf once drank. You fling a pebble into the murky current, it plops into the water, and its echo summons some ancient sound, words pronounced once upon a time—maybe even your own. The Neris remembers everything; it's a miraculous river, you just need to hear it talking.¹²

Alas, the memories of the river, like all those associated with Vilnius are anything but glorious. Thus, among his other notable contemporaries, for example, Jurgis Kunčinas, Gavelis described the realities of the Soviet era without any nostalgia or longing for the "hell lost". This is especially true speaking about literary narratives published during the period of national resurgence and those that appeared after the fall of the Communist regime in 1990.

Like their predecessors in the 90's, most of the important younger writers who ascended Lithuania's literary scene after *Vilnius Poker* was published, did not and do not seem to exhibit any longing for this period of captivity either. In his novel *Murmuring Wall* (2008) that might be well described as aspiring to the metaphor of the 20th century, Sigitas Parulskis reflects on this period without any nostalgia either. His view is far more

¹² Gavelis, *Vilnius Poker*, 26.

ironic, detached and occasionally supplied with some black humor. The prose writer Herkus Kunčius—one of the most prolific Lithuanian authors of the post-dependence period with some two dozen novels, collections of short-stories and essays as well as a number of plays written for the theater to his credit—continues to revisit issues of history and memory in his writings. His most recent novels, *A Lithuanian in Vilnius* (2011) and *A Dervish from Kaunas* (2014), as well as his earlier collection of short stories *To Betray, to Renounce, to Vilify* (2007) are all focused on the period of Soviet domination. His earlier novel titled *The Anthology of a Drunkard* published in 2009 is, among other things, a literary glimpse into the Soviet period and the role played by *vodka*. The author is well aware of certain cultural aspects of the Soviet “drinking culture”: in that period hard drinking, though formally considered a social vice, was largely appreciated and even encouraged in order to stop people from thinking about the essence of the repressive colonial system and, what is perhaps even more important, to refrain from any actions against the regime.

Kunčius’ novel *A Lithuanian in Vilnius* might well be classified under the title of “postcolonial”, and not only because the author presents a narrative covering the events that happen “after dependence” or “after colonialism”. Postcolonial theorist Ato Quayson has rightly observed that postcolonialism does not necessarily mean “after”, as postcolonialism denotes relations that are associated with the experience of colonialism and its consequences both in the past and in the present.¹³ Thus Kunčius’ novels, and *A Lithuanian in Vilnius* in particular, can be considered truly postcolonial narratives as the author is concerned with issues of cultural and personal hybridity and identity that are of utmost importance to postcolonial authors engaged in reexamining these issues. The narrative of *A Lithuanian in Vilnius* encompasses many layers. Among other things, the author makes numerous references to the period of dependence. The main protagonist of this novel, Napoleonas Šeputis returns to Vilnius—the city of his youth—on the occasion of the nomination of Lithuania’s capital to the status of culture capital of Europe. Unlike his predecessor Ričardas Gavelis, who presented an impressive quasi-sociological theory of *homo Lithuanicus* in his *Vilnius Poker*, Kunčius avoids philosophizing and relies more on memory’s work while depicting the realities of the Soviet era. While wandering in the streets of Vilnius after he had suffered minor injuries from a car-accident and eventually escaped from the hospital where he had been cared for, Šeputis encounters buildings and spaces that trigger reminiscences of the Soviet period. Curiously enough, the

¹³ Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process*, 2.

protagonist's memories are strongly associated with his service in the Soviet army. Šeputis's narrative of his still very intact memories of military service, is presented with humorous overtones or occasionally black humor. The stupidity and senselessness of daily rituals are rendered as vividly as if they had happened a day or two before. While wandering along the streets of Vilnius, the novel's protagonist evokes his time in the military and brings back to life the most "memorable" moments of his service bordering between comedy and nightmare. Šeputis's very much alive memory brings back the colorful characters that he met during his military service in the Soviet army. One of these is general Gaurylius, a retired military officer who treats the protagonist to kefir and white bread while Šeputis, during this time of his military service, provides private services to the retired general, building a garage for the old man. Though he never dares to confront the aging general with questions, Šeputis, nevertheless, realizes that

he could have listened to the narrative of comrade Gaurylius, an honored cultural activist of the Lithuanian SSR. Not only about his native village of Židikai, World War II, the glorious way of the 16th Lithuanian division or military political academy named after Lenin where he received higher party education. Retired general Gaurylius—on condition that he himself wished—could have told him about the post-war years, about the decisions of the military tribunal and circumstances under which he, then just a lieutenant, signed orders to execute individuals and bury them in Tuskulėnai—on the bank of the river Neris, in front of St. Peter and Paul's Church. Eventually it was found out that the mass grave there contained no less than 700 victims.¹⁴

The whole narrative is full of references to such "commonplace" situations and the ambiguous characters, who represent the colonizers and the colonized, all of them affected by power relations and the hierarchy set by the colonial regime. The narrative of Kunčius' novel, though more humorous (in terms of black humor), is far less nightmarish than that of Gavelis's *Vilnius Poker*. However, it is devoid of any nostalgia or even occasional warm feelings. The Soviet period is presented as an era of absurdity, ambiguity, lies, and underlying social madness shared by both the oppressors and the oppressed. His most recent novel, *A Dervish from Kaunas*, is another glimpse back into the Soviet times. Though located in another city, Kaunas, which used to be the interim capital of Lithuania during the period of Polish occupation of the Vilnius region in the years 1922-1940, the novel once again presents a narrative focusing on the

¹⁴ Kunčius, *Dviveidis romanas*, 167. My translation.