

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Herkus Kunčius' Novel *The Ornament* as a Postmodernist Analysis of Contemporary Lithuanian Society Diana Jovaišienė

From 1945 up to the restoration of the State of Lithuania in 1990, Lithuanian writers were restricted by Soviet ideological rules. As the country regained independence, Western European literature and literary theory became easily accessible so that it was obvious how far Lithuanian literature had been distanced from newer Western traditions. Gradually, with heavy borrowing from Western examples, new themes and styles of writing emerged, ranging from more mainstream genres of popular literature aimed at commercial success to more serious fiction, characterised by a great deal of intellectualism and aesthetic experimentation.

Contemporary Lithuanian writers have now found themselves able to reject the styles and themes that had been thrust on them by the conventions of socialist realism, while topics that were previously forbidden, including the explicit presentation of violence, sex, sexual minorities, and the aesthetics of brutality, are now eagerly explored. Furthermore, Lithuanian historical events and cultural identity issues are being read in new ways. Many younger writers have embraced postmodernist techniques, using fragmentation and a narrative that lacks continuity. In these novels the contemporary narrators or characters express themselves boldly, no longer feeling any need to serve the political regime; typically, they treat Lithuanian society, even if it is now independent, with a strong degree of irony, an irony which is also self-directed. The individuals depicted in these novels are often frustrated; their unfulfilled expectations result in cynical, grotesque and absurd situations. Postmodernist techniques probably appeal to many of these writers because they are suited to dealing with social and cultural realities that are also chaotic, change rapidly and offend older Lithuanian beliefs and values.

Herkus Kunčius (born 1965) is one of the best-known of Lithuanian postmodernist authors. The dominant theme in his work is the degradation and devaluation of moral and values in contemporary Lithuanian society. By means of irony and parody, he demythologises the Lithuanian national cultural values that are now being re-formulated and officially propagated, as well as satirising the Lithuanian intelligentsia and elite. Instead, he gives his own interpretations of Lithuanian national icons and symbols. For his explorations of post-Soviet Lithuanian realities, Kunčius uses an abundance of experiments with form and postmodernist strategies, such as intertextuality, montage, fragmented composition and the combination of different genres.

Kunčius grew up in a family of artists: both his parents were soloists in the Kaunas Musical Theatre, and he himself completed a diploma in art history and theory at the Vilnius Art Academy in 1990. Afterwards he worked as an editor for literary magazines. He made his debut as a writer in one of these journals, *Metai*, in 1996, the same year that he published his first novel, *Ir dugnas visada priglaus* (*The Ground Will Always Give Shelter*). He is an exceptionally productive writer, having created two collections of short stories, plays for children and adults, and a number of novels, including *Matka Pitka* (*Matka Pitka*, 1998), *Barbarai šventykloje* (*Barbarians*

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in a Temple, 2001), *Ornamentas (The Ornament, 2002)*, *Gaidžių milžinkapis (The Tumulus of Roosters, 2004)* and *Lietuvis Vilniuje (A Lithuanian in Vilnius, 2011)*. At present, after long visits to Tbilisi, he is writing a book about Georgia.

In the Lithuanian cultural scene, as with many writers of what can be called elite literature, Kunčius' position is ambiguous. In one sense, he is a very successful writer: a member of the Lithuanian Writers' Union, he has no difficulties having his works published and has won many literary awards. On the other hand, the larger reading public does not find his novels attractive. Only one thousand copies are printed, which means that he earns very little from his writing. The disillusioning sense that higher culture is no longer valued in a free market system is evident in his work.

*The Ornament* (2002), which has been chosen for discussion in this paper, is a postmodernist novel full of self-irony. The main character is GinTarasas, an amber artist, whose name translates as a pun on 'gintaras', 'amber'. The novel has a strange narrative line describing how the hero takes a girl's jewelled medallion at a dance and accidentally swallows it. He eventually returns it to her, but the jewel is missing. At the same time, he has been going to a dentist and needs gold to have a crown made. Now it turns out that jewels are growing on his teeth, which tempts one of his dentists, a Mr Rostropovič, to steal and smuggle them abroad. However, much of the novel is composed of disconnected character monologues, scenes of erratic actions, descriptions of momentary sensations and pseudo-scholarly material on amber and other things.

This analysis first discusses the postmodernist structuring of the novel; then it looks at the novelist's use of intertextuality in sub-titles that have little or no connection to the contents of sections. Further, the way in which the respected figure of Mstislav Rostropovich is transformed is examined. Another major example of ironic transformation is the way that a Lithuanian national symbol, amber, is treated. Finally, the notion of the carnivalesque is applied to some episodes in the novel.

*The Ornament* is not a long novel, only 211 pages, but it is divided by sub-titles into twelve sections of lengths varying from less than one page, like 'Paskutinis įkvėpimas' or 'The Last Inspiration', which is only one-third of a page, while the Conclusion is just one sentence long, to 68 pages ('Daug vandens nutekėjo', 'Many waters have flowed'). In addition, the longer sections are divided into sub-sections, also with their own titles. Visually, Kunčius puts lecture material that is pseudo-scientific (about the history of amber, for example) in italics, distinguishing it from dialogues, narrative and reflections by characters.

The structural principle of *The Ornament* is similar to that of montage: except for the narrative of swallowing the medallion, which appears and disappears, the different sections and sub-sections are not arranged in any obvious order. In addition, as a result of combining several literary genres and formats, the novel becomes fragmentary and discontinuous. The author plays with such genres, such as the scientific article ('The whole truth about construction materials'), a play ('MANY WATERS HAVE FLOWED'), a pastoral ('Pastoral'), a chant ('Chant'), a journal ('From a country priest's journal'), a lullaby ('Lullaby'), a will ('A piece from Anya's will'), a lecture ('Humanism and origin of supernatural. A lecture'), and a poem in couplets ('Pope's couplets from a prayer-book published in Regensburg in 1945').

The text is assembled from mosaic pieces so that logical links, correlations and sequences of events are often hard to follow or are completely lost.

Such narrative fragments compel the reader to focus on momentary sensations experienced while reading, so that the sequential plot line becomes less important than these fleeting sensory perceptions. The Canadian cultural critic Marshall McLuhan asks a rhetorical question: 'Is it not evident that the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous, one is in the world of the structure and of configuration?'<sup>1</sup>

This kind of confusion starts with the first pages of the novel, when the narrator expresses his despair in trying to find suitable words for the beginning of *The Ornament*: 'Desperation. All efforts to find the necessary words – fruitless. This drives me mad'. ("Desperacija. Pastangos rasti reikalingus žodžius – bevaisės. Tai mane nervina.") (emphasis in original)<sup>2</sup> Instead, the reader is offered a number of false beginnings, as the narrator rejects opening sentences imitating Romain Gary, Le Clezio, Henry Miller and Vladimir Nabokov. It is intriguing when he, still undecided how to begin, presents a surprise: the text, he states that he will start from the ending: 'to save time, I'm just going to jump straight to the end' ("taupydamas laiką, šoku tiesiai į pabaigą") (7; emphasis in original), where there is a 'big, white, fresh scented, monumental urinal at the bottom of the page' ("baltas, gaiviai kvėpiantis, monumentalus pisuaras puslapio apačioje") (7; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, as it turns out, this image is not connected to the real story that follows, either. The narrator makes up his mind how he should have begun the novel only at the very end of the text:

I should have begun like this: *In the faraway village of Yarbub, Abou Nasif became a father, when Zuleikha gave birth to two sons – Nabhan and Ashkhat.*

O pradėti vertėjo taip: *Tolimame Jarbubo kaime Abhu Nasifas susilaukė sūnų Nabghano ir Ashchato, kuriuos pagimdė Zuleicha.* (211; emphasis in original)

Again, this has nothing to do with the story of GinTarasas or Lithuania: it seems to deny that what the reader has read has any significance.

Apart from reversing the places of the beginning and ending, the writer seems to be doing the same with many parts of this novel. As they try to make sense of the text, the readers imagine the author sitting at his computer, experimenting with the text by moving its elements around. The possibilities of modern media allow doing this instantly and the number of versions of created texts is enormous, especially when the text has as many sub-sections as *The Ornament*. Nothing would change if the allegedly historical facts about amber or Pope's couplets were moved to a different place in the text. These are still just fragments, while the real point of the work seems to remain playing with associations.

Such a writing style can be described as a game in which the writer plays with text fragments. McLuhan describes art not only as a game, but also as 'an extension of

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge; London : MIT Press, 1995) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Herkus Kunčius, *The Ornament* (Vilnius: Charibdė, 2002) 7. Further references to this novel will be included in parentheses within the text.

human awareness in contrived and conventional patterns.’<sup>3</sup> He suggests that what we felt or saw in one situation can be experienced in a completely new one. A familiar experience is transferred to new forms and contexts, highlighting bland ordinary realities. In this way, different elements of a text that seemingly have no relation can highlight those aspects of others that are invisible at first glance. Only through their interactions does the reader see the points that are essential to the meaning of the novel. The reader has to slow down frequently, perhaps even to stop and think about the meaning of one transition or another. For example, does the ironic piece ‘He. The end of a spiritual circuit’, about a would-be saint, affect the main story? It is a story within a story. Many of the texts are so distanced from each other that readers are completely free to interpret them and play with personal associations.

From the perspective of composition, the novel does not conform to the concept of a traditional novel. Readers will most likely be disappointed if they expect a coherent structure, clear plot twists, or a light, pleasant reading experience. However, the absence of meaning can also be meaningful, if the reader is intrigued, drawn into the text, and encouraged to reflect creatively.

The reader’s creative engagement in the text is also encouraged by the writer’s use of such forms of transtextuality as architextuality, metatextuality, intertextuality, paratextuality, and hypertextuality, as defined by Gérard Genette.<sup>4</sup> Architextuality is apparent in Kunčius’ combination of different literary forms, such as the pastoral, journal, discourse, lecture, lullaby, soap opera, scientific article, and a poem in couplets. Metatextuality appears in the narrator’s reflections on possible beginnings and endings for the novel, as has already been discussed. Furthermore, the novel uses numerous quotes from Nabokov, Hesse, Miller, Gary and Le Clézio. In this way, the text, which is very specifically Lithuanian in many ways, reaches out beyond Lithuanian culture at the same time. Chapter titles often rely on paratextuality; for instance, many refer to well-known writers or works from Western European culture: ‘A dream: Strindberg’s nightmare (colorific)’ (“Sapnas: Strindbergo košmaras (spalvotas)”, Strindberg’s subconsciousness, nightmares, dreams); ‘The pleasure of the text’ (“Teksto malonumas”, an allusion to Roland Barthes ‘The pleasure of the text’); ‘To Caesar what is Caesar’s’ (“Kas Ciesoriaus Ciesoriui”, a reference to the Bible); ‘The same Kafka’ (“Tas pats Kafka”, a reference to the writer Kafka); ‘The Flying Dutchman’ (an allusion to “Skrajojantis Olandas”, a legend and an opera about a cursed ship); ‘Schindler’s List’ (“Shindlerio sąrašas”, a well known film); ‘The truth is out there’ (“Tiesa slypi kažkur anapus”, the phrase familiar from the TV series ‘The X-Files’); and ‘Everything you wanted to know but did not dare to ask’ (“Viskas apie tai, ką norėjote sužinoti, bet nedrįsote paklausti”, a popular book about sex).

There are other references which are clear to Lithuanian readers but would probably mean little or nothing to an English reader: for example, ‘Lolek and Bolek: searching for the future tense’ (“Liolekas ir Bolekas: būsimąjo laiko beiėškant”, characters from Polish animated cartoons), ‘Guilty without guilt’ (“Be kaltės kalti”, a drama by the Russian dramatist Alexandr Ostrovsky); ‘Nobody wanted to die’ (“Niekas nenorėjo mirti”, a Lithuanian film by director Vytautas Žalakevičius, set after the Second World War); and ‘My nights are brighter than your days’ (“Mano

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<sup>3</sup> McLuhan 241.

<sup>4</sup> Irina Melnikova, *Intertekstualumas: teorija ir praktika* (Vilnius: Vilniaus universitetas, 2003) 56-57.

naktys šviesesnės už jūsų dienas”), a version of the title of an erotic Polish novel and film). Although these titles often have no obvious connection to the contents of the chapters they name, their inclusion is an ironic commentary on the enthusiastic absorption of various influences, especially the fashionable Western ones in the period since 1990.

Sometimes, Kunčius’ text engages into a more aggressive relationship with the other texts it exploits. For instance, at one point a character exclaims: ‘*Take me and... Take me. Once more! Take me!!! Take me... God, it hurts!*’ (“*Imkit mane ir ... Paimkit. Dar kartą! Imkit!!! Imkit... Dieve, kaip skauda!*”) (75; emphasis in original). The Lithuanian reader will certainly recognize the first three words ‘Take me and...’ (“*Imkit mane ir...*”) as the opening words from the preface of the first printed Lithuanian book, the *Catechism* by Martynas Mažvydas, dating to 1547, which begins ‘Take me and read me...’ (“*Imkit mane ir skaitykit...*”). This is part of the Lithuanian national canon, taught in schools and often referred to. In this way, Kunčius provocatively parodies one of the icons of Lithuanian national pride, which for Lithuanians represents the birth of Lithuanian literature and culture.

The most striking example of Kunčius’ attacks on symbols and figures that have a positive association in current Lithuanian nationalism is his satiric use of the name of the famous Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, known also as an active advocate of human rights. Rostropovich has had close ties with Lithuania since 1991, when he organised a fund-raising concert in Spain to support Lithuanian independence, proclaiming on that occasion, ‘Everything connected to Lithuania is dear to me.’ He has paid many visits to Lithuania and since 2003 his charitable fund, Pagalba Lietuvos vaikams (Help for Lithuanian children), works in two directions, providing financial support for children suffering from leukemia and other major diseases, and also funding children with exceptional talents in music, studies or sport. Rostropovich has received more than one national award, including being made a member of the order of the Lithuanian Grand Duke Gediminas in 1995.<sup>5</sup>

In Kunčius’ novel, however, a character named Professor Mstislav Rostropovich features as a prominent and internationally acclaimed odontologist, proclaimed the Person of 2000, and a university professor, known, however, for his lewd and abusive behavior with the students. Kunčius’ Rostropovich, who is a major character in the narrative, is portrayed not as a courteous, pleasant man going out of his way to help Lithuania regain its position in the free world, but as an alcoholic and manipulative sexual pervert. In one episode, during an examination, the professor locks a female student in the room and starts harassing her:

He needs to unwind, so he unbuttons his clothes and starts showing a tattoo of a jolly dolphin on his private parts.

Jam būtina atsipalaiduoti, todėl jis atsisagsto ir rodo linksmo delfino tatuiruotę intymioje vietoje. (134)

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<sup>5</sup>[www.bernardinai.lt/archyvas/straipsnis/19291+Rostropovi%C4%8Dius+pagalba+leukemija&cd=3&hl=lt&ct=clnk&gl=lt](http://www.bernardinai.lt/archyvas/straipsnis/19291+Rostropovi%C4%8Dius+pagalba+leukemija&cd=3&hl=lt&ct=clnk&gl=lt)

Here Rostropovich's attitude that he can do what he wants is a parody of the cellist Rostropovich as an advocate of freedom. Using his name, Kunčius has a chance to explore the often irresponsible contemporary Lithuanian understanding of personal liberation. Presumably he has chosen the musician for the shock value of this satire; perhaps his own family background in classical music was of significance in this choice.

In *The Ornament* the much-revered Lithuanian figure of the intellectual is presented as morally ambivalent the figure of the odontologist. The specific object of the writer's parody is academia and its idealisation. In the novel, Mstislav Rostropovich imitates and simulates his role as a professor. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard defines *simulation* as a false depiction of reality that is meant to deceive someone. In our present-day reality, where we become *simulants*, and *simulacrums*, Baudrillard analyses the state of education and institutions and reveals their crisis. He claims that 'The exchange of signs (of knowledge, of culture) in the university between 'teachers' and the 'taught' has for some time been nothing but a doubled collusion of bitterness and indifference.' ("Universitete pasikeitimas (žinojimo, kultūros) ženklais tarp "mokytojų" ir "mokomųjų" jau kurį laiką tėra tam tikras susitarimas, kurį lydi abejingumo kartėlis.")<sup>6</sup> Even though Baudrillard admits that such a 'decaying' university can cause great harm, he does not advise reforming it, but incites its death to further 'the decay of all society' ("visos visuomenės puvimą").<sup>7</sup>

Kunčius also parodies the system of oral examinations, still common in some Lithuanian universities, in a scene in which Professor Rostropovich reluctantly listens to a student's 'gibberish' on dental hygiene, while dreaming about some rest and relaxation (133, 134). A female student is forced to have sex to pass an examination as Rostropovich cares more about satisfying his appetites than about educating students. What the students get from his teaching is also questionable:

Professor Rostropovich has heard some interesting statements from the examinees: the mouth is the prison of speech; a tooth for a tooth – push another one forward.

ir kokių tik naujienų profesorius Rostropovičius neišgirdo iš gžaminuojamųjų: burna – burnos kalėjimas, dantis už dantį – atkišk kitą. (133)

Students become apathetic, since the professor looks uninterested, while examinations are dull formalities, although unavoidable. The author ironises the harassment at the university with a suggestive phrase: 'The workload at the university is really very unbearable' ("Ištis nepakeliami krūviai universitete") (134).

Professor Rostropovich also enjoys such pleasures as drinking enormous quantities of champagne and hard liquor, as well as illegally inhaling ether and helium and taking cocaine. His behaviour is not that of a sane mind: at one point in the narrative he plans a murder and readers are told that he has already murdered his previous wives and children; he also commits acts of violence against his neighbours.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simuliakrai ir simuliacija* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2002) 178.

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard 172.

Sexually his behavior is very provocative: he masturbates in front of other people, proposes that they measure their sex organs, and begs others to sexually satisfy him. His vulgarity and aggressiveness undermine the traditional Lithuanian belief in their cultural and intellectual elite.

In this heavily satirical portrait, Kunčius questions and demystifies the concept of intellectualism and breaks stereotypes. By using irony, he disturbs the hierarchy of values that became commonplace throughout Lithuanian cultural history, especially in regard to the importance of higher education and the role of intellectuals in preserving Lithuanianism. The Professor's erudite and intellectual features are contrasted with his weaknesses, cruelty, or even animalism. The author's ambivalent portrayal of the intelligentsia through this figure is often disturbing and thought-provoking.

In a similar way Kunčius takes amber, the dominant image/motif in *The Ornament* and a Lithuanian national symbol, and presents it in a variety of grotesque situations. The novel abounds in allegedly historical facts about the amber, inserted apparently at random. The main character's name, GinTarasas, is a formation of two words with very different meanings: 'GinTaras' meaning amber, and 'Tarasas', a Slavic name, possibly a reference to the novel *Taras Bulba* (1835) by Nikolai Gogol, about a Cossack colonel who fought for the freedom of his country in the seventeenth century. Gogol's novel romanticises Cossack battles, and Taras Bulba is seen as a symbol of freedom. Through this intertextual reference, the protagonist and narrator of Kunčius' novel is endowed with dual implications: he becomes a representative of a Lithuanian symbol with an ironic allusion to a freedom fighter.

Roland Barthes states that a symbol has substance and carries significance, whereas the significant does not possess these qualities on its own.<sup>8</sup> In the case of amber as a symbol, it acquires significance only through its association of the significant and the significate: 'amber-rock' and 'symbol of Lithuania'. But in Kunčius' novel this significance is demythologised. Instead of continuing the romantic tradition in which amber is poetically referred to as 'the tears of the Baltic sea' ("Baltijos jūros ašarų") (177, 178) and valued as a national icon, amber is described through vulgar references to the color of urine. Kunčius reveals how, for a contemporary consumer society, it has become a mere commodity, writing sarcastically:

*Amber – a noble substance, often the colour of urine, valued for centuries by travelers, jewellers, collectors and the locals. It fascinates and cures. Oh, how much we would lose, if amber vanished from our life! If there were no more amber necklaces, prosthetics, teeth and nails! The world would be so miserable!*

*Gintaras – tai tauri, neretai šlapimo spalvos medžiaga, nuo seno vertinama keliautojų, juvelyrų, kolekcionierių, muziejininkų bei vietinių žmonių. Gintaras žavi, kerį, gydo. Kiek daug netektume, jei mūsų gyvenime nebūtų gintaro! Jei nebūtų gintarinių karolių, protezų, dantų, nagų! Koks nykus būtų pasaulis!*  
(30; emphasis in original)

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<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *Teksto malonumas* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1991) 86.

Kunčius emphasises the utilitarian function of amber. He writes about the history of smuggling amber: *'It is known that Roman merchants used to hide amber not only in their noses, mouths and ears, but also in their anuses, to avoid customs'* (*"Yra žinoma, kad romėnų prekijai, vengdami muitų, gintarą vežė slėpdami jį ne tik nosies, burnos, ausų ertmėse, bet ir išeinamosiose"*) (35; emphasis in original), and tells a supposedly real contemporary story about a man from Spain, who hid a piece of amber that weighed around fifteen kilograms in his body. For catching the smuggler, the head of the customs office receives amber earrings, which obviously are of no use to him. This is an ironic way of looking at amber, which is only of monetary value to contemporary Lithuanians.

Continuing his attack on consumerism, the narrator also invents an amber mosaic picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn. A real icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn in Vilnius has been worshipped for centuries; it is not an amber mosaic, but the reference would be very clear to every Lithuanian. Indeed, in the streets of the Old Town surrounding the shrine, different kitschy pictures using amber are sold to tourists. In the novel during a papal visit to Vilnius, the Mosaic is said to be given to Pope John Paul II, but, the narrator admits, *'no one will be praying to it in Vatican'* (*"kuriai niekas Vatikano saugyklose nesimels"*) (55; emphasis in original). Displaced to another country and context, like most such gifts, it will be placed in a storage room and forgotten as merely another meaningless souvenir. The dual Lithuanian symbols, 'The Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn' and 'Amber', are made to seem irrelevant and unremarkable. In this case, the chapter title 'The Fate of the Substance' suggests that amber is nothing more than an everyday object which loses its sacred value in a foreign territory. There is a double demythologisation here: that of the Christian symbol Blessed Virgin Mary of the Gates of Dawn, and of amber, the Lithuanian gold. This passage shows that amber has become just a worthless 'substance', a 'rock' to a foreigner. The utilitarian function of the amber is emphasised, instead of its sacral conception.

In a very provocative scene the novel takes a highly respected figure of contemporary Lithuanian life, the President of Lithuania, showing him behaving with great disrespect towards the national symbol, referring to it bluntly as a nuisance: *'The President is clapping particularly loudly, and shouting that he hates amber and amber souvenirs, there is an abundance of which not only at his home, but at the presidential palace as well'* (*"Ypač energingai ploja Pezidentas, kuris šaukia nekenčiąs gintarų ir suvenyrų, kurių apstu ne tik jo namuose, bet ir jo vadovaujamoje institucijoje"*) (177; emphasis in original). Coming from the political head of Lithuania, this negative attitude towards amber as a Lithuanian symbol expresses Kunčius' opinion that amber, like many iconic objects in Lithuanian culture, is becoming simply another product in a consumer-oriented society.

This scene with the president of the country is only one in a novel which is full of bizarre, abnormal and indeed carnivalesque situations. Mikhail Bakhtin sees the carnival, a sum of the various festivities of the carnival type, as a 'syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort' (*"sinkretinė vaizdine apeiginio pobūdžio forma"*)<sup>9</sup> transferred in written texts to a literary language. According to Bakhtin, 'carnavalesque is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out' (*"gyvenimas*

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dostojevskio poetikos problemos* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1996) 143.



atvirkščiai”), ‘the reverse side of the world’ (“pasaulis priešingai”).<sup>10</sup> The usual laws, prohibitions, and restrictions are rejected, while the distance between the people and their rulers disappears and the hierarchic barriers vanish. In Bakhtin’s theory the carnivalesque is a liberating experience, but in *The Ornament* the strongest feeling aroused by such scenes is more of chaos and disorder.

At the centre of the novel is the festively ambivalent figure of GinTarasas. Looking from the perspective of everyday logic, GinTarasas’ actions and experiences are strange and unusually eccentric: he gets along perfectly well with his lover Dora’s husband, Professor Rostropovich, and does not feel any anger towards his tormentors and extortionists. Even stranger is his behaviour with the medallion, which he swallows at a dance, saying in excuse: ‘I didn’t mean to swallow it’, although it is not normal to take a pendant off someone’s neck and put it into his mouth. He does other bizarre things, like trying to locate gold in his home, even though he did not hide it there. Often his actions are disgusting, like searching for a jewel and a golden dental crown in his faeces.

In the novel the most vivid carnival elements unfold at an eccentric masquerade-orgy attended by the country’s elite, composed of judges, doctors, teachers, members of parliament, lawyers and others. This masquerade-orgy takes place in the famous Amber Museum in the seaside resort of Palanga because it’s convenient; the museum is in a beautiful estate with fine buildings and gardens. To entertain themselves, the participants are trying cocaine, inhaling helium, and even shooting at the museum exhibits; they also engage in hunting down the swans in a wildlife sanctuary and fish in the nearby Curonian Lagoon, using electric shock. The Amber Museum here is a form of the carnival plaza, where people from all social classes, from the President of Lithuania to GinTarasas, an ordinary amber craftsman, mingle with ease. Traditional values related to moral and cultural behaviour are devalued. A particularly vivid episode is that of people gaily shooting at unique exhibits of large pieces of amber that have inclusions, trapped insects and plants in them: ‘The high society is intrigued...[...]. The do-gooder of the world is squirming, doesn’t want to defend the amber – tears of the Baltic sea – anymore’ (“Aukštuomenė intriguota...<...>... Pasaulio teisuolis muistosi, nebenori gintarų – Baltijos jūros ašarų”) (177, 178). During the ball, one ‘do-gooder’, who tries to protect the amber exhibits at which others are shooting, is killed. Simultaneously, the dentist Dora gives birth to twins, but neither of these occurrences causes surprise or alarm. The juxtaposition of birth and death in the novel reflects the emotional essence of the carnivalesque, though in an extreme and satirical way. The text strategy chosen by Kunčius is to use elements of the carnivalesque that allow presenting serious topics about Lithuanian values and culture today in an ironic way.

The masquerade at the Amber Museum is a parody of pompous and extravagant banquets and parties held by the contemporary Lithuanian elite, which are regularly reported in magazines and other media, creating the strong feeling that a new power group has formed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Parodying is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same ‘world turned inside out’ (“Parodijavimas – tai nuvainikuojančio antrininko

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<sup>10</sup> Bachtin 144.

sukūrimas, tai tas pats “išvirkščias” pasaulis”).<sup>11</sup> An ironic view of the pastimes of the intelligentsia and the newly formed elite, often going as far as vandalism against treasured cultural institutions, prompts readers to revise their formerly idealistic conceptions of what post-Soviet Lithuanian society would be like.

In *The Ornament*, Herkus Kunčius radically, sometimes even drastically, erases traditional meanings and suggests new implications for them. However, it would be wrong to state that the novel is completely distanced from traditional values: as in many satirical and ironical works, the notions of proper moral behaviour are culturally present in the reader’s mind, as a context against which the characters’ eccentric behavior can be evaluated. The text stimulates the reader to take a look at Lithuanian identity from a different perspective, and reconsider traditional values in the face of the challenges experienced by contemporary Lithuanian society.

The postmodernist construction of the text and ironic manner of writing in *The Ornament* allow the writer to produce a satirical image of post-Soviet Lithuania. His experiments with the text offer a new angle, a new form of perception for his readers, in which reality is de-mythologised and meanings associated with national identity are re-composed. The extreme self-directed irony highlights failed hopes and expectations, but also encourages Lithuanian readers to laugh at themselves as opposed to blaming the Soviet past or the influence of current Western culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Bachtin 150.