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Literary portrait of Motiejus Valancius in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis

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The article seeks for the analysis of a literary portrait of Motiejus

*Valancius, a famous Lithuanian writer, cultural figure, and bishop of the mid-19th century, depicted in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas*

Jasaitis. The analysis of the main character portrait is related to the conception of the biographical novel genre offered by Mikhail Bakhtin. Juozas

Jasaitis' novel "The Shepherd" refers to the energetic type of biography discussed by Bakhtin. There are many details from the real-life of Motiejus Valancius which come to the memory of the main character. A wholistic portrait of the writer and bishop is revealed through the main character memories, the symbolical journey of his consciousness to the past envisaged by the reiterating topos of the flight of the soul, so well-known in the European poetic perception and allowing to transgress the real earthly time and transfer to the only reality given to a human being, namely, that of the soul.

The author-narrator has designed a portrait, not of a hero, but a lonely man standing on the threshold of death. Following biblical poetics, the life story of the main character is depicted as a constant penetration of a human being from the darkness into the light. The whole life of Valancius is put into a single day expressed with the help of the dawn of the spring topos, so typical of the mythical and historical Lithuanian poetic perception of the 19th century.

The biographical novel "The Shepherd" highlights the harmony of Lithuanian nationality and the catholic faith characteristic of Motiejus Valancius. The image of the diplomat of the Lithuanian nation created in the novel is close to the notion of a Lithuanian national identity formulated by Algirdas Julius Greimas. Much of the attention in the novel is dedicated to the meetings of the main character with the prominent figures of Lithuanian literature and culture in the 19th century.

Original texts written by Valancius himself are weaved into the cloth of the narrative and thus support the genre of a biographical novel. The novel also contains original excerpts from Simonas Stanevicius', Antanas Baranauskas' works which indicate the author-narrator's attention to the Lithuanian poetic tradition of the 19th century.

Keywords: *biographical novel, literary portrait, the 19th century Lithuanian literature, culture and history, Motiejus Valancius, the topos of the flight of the soul.*

ЛІТЕРАТУРНИЙ ПОРТРЕТ МОТІЮСА ВАЛАНЦІЯ В БІОГРАФІЧНОМУ РОМАНІ «ПОВОДИР» ЮОЗАСА ЯСАЙТИСА

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Метою статті є аналіз літературного портрету Мотіюса Валанція, відомого литовського письменника, культурного діяча і єпископа середини XIX століття, який зображений у біографічному романі «Поводир» Юозаса Ясайтиса. Аналіз портрету головного героя пов'язаний з концепцією жанру біографічного роману, запропонованою Михайлом Бахтіним. Роман Юозаса Ясайтиса «Поводир» відноситься до енергійного типу біографій, які обговорював Бахтін. До пам'яті головного героя приходять багато деталей з реального життя Мотіюса Валанція. Цілісний портрет письменника та єпископа розкривається через спогади головного героя, символічну подорож його свідомості в минуле, передбачену повторюваним топосом польоту душі, настільки відомим у європейському поетичному сприйнятті, що дозволяє переступити реальний земний час і перейти до єдиної реальності, даної людині, а саме — душі.

Автор-оповідач оформив портрет не героя, а самотньої людини, що стоїть на порозі смерті. Слідуючи біблійній поетиці, історія життя головного героя зображується як постійне проникнення людини з темряви на світло. Усе життя Валанція вкладено в один день, виражений за допомогою зорі весняного топосу, такого типового для міфічного та історичного литовського поетичного сприйняття XIX століття.

Біографічний роман «Поводир» висвітлює гармонію литовської національності та католицьку віру, характерну для Мотіюса Валанція. Образ дипломата литовської нації, створений у романі, близький до поняття про національну ідентичність Литви, сформульованого Альгірдасом Юліусом Греймасом. Значна увага в романі присвячена зустрічам головного героя з видатними діячами литовської літератури та культури XIX століття.

Оригінальні тексти, написані самим Валанцієм, вплетені в сюжет оповіді і таким чином підтримують жанр біографічного роману. У романі також містяться оригінальні уривки з творів Симонаса Станевічіуса, Антанаса Баранаускаса, які свідчать про увагу автора-оповідача до литовської поетичної традиції XIX століття.

Ключові слова: біографічний роман, літературний портрет, литовська література, культура та історія XIX століття, Мотіюс Валанцій, топос польоту душі.

The purpose of the article is to discuss a literary portrait of Motiejus Valancius, a prominent figure in literary and cultural life in Lithuania in the mid-19th century, created in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis (2005). The analysis of the main literary character, in its turn, is inseparably related to yet another task, namely, the discussion of the genre of biographical novel, in other words, how the depiction of a literary character correlates with the genre of biographical novel indicated by the author-narrator himself.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the sources of contemporary European biographical novels reside in the Late Antiquity, Roman-Hellenistic epoch when biographical forms highlighted self-perception and identity of a public person (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 290). For Bakhtin, Antique biographies featuring the “essential criterion of publicity” (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 293) were of two types: energetic (Plutarch) and analytic (Suetonius). Mikhail Bakhtin defined the energetic type of biography as the revelation of “energy”, i.e. personality character, through his/her actions, behavior, speeches, and other expressions of human activity: “biographical time (...) is the dissemination of a personality character” (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 291) which does not coincide with chronology. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s opinion, “personality character neither grows nor changes – it only fulfills itself when it is depicted fragmentally in the beginning, whereas it becomes complete and whole at the end of a biography” (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 292). The second, analytical, type of biography features a scheme with certain defined categories which describe biographical material: a public life, family life, relations with friends, virtues, faults, habits (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 292). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, this type of biographical form that has remained up to nowadays is created following categories: as a person, as a writer, as a thinker, and so on (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 293). Bakhtin emphasized that the self-perception of an individual was not revealed by the above-mentioned biographical forms of Antiquity. In the majority of cases, public rhetorical forms, which later suffered certain modifications, prevailed.

The biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis indicates the modification of the energetic biography type discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin. The novel offers a unified literary portrait of Motiejus Valancius as a human being and a bishop, a spiritual leader of the Lithuanian nation, which is composed of the depiction of the writer’s literary, cultural and diplomatic activity. However, in the contemporary biographical novel by Jasaitis, the public activity of a person is revealed through private existence, individual experiences of consciousness. In the biographical novel, this junction of private and public life is symbolically represented by the space of a room where the whole life of the main character – bishop Motiejus Valancius – takes place.

Mikhail Bakhtin claimed that the chronotope of time and space typical of biographical forms is related to the chronotope of the path of life. The biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis offers a symbolical journey of the main character's — Motiejus Valancius' — consciousness into the past times. The chosen modern strategy of narration is intended to reveal Motiejus Valancius' personality, his path of life through his whole life memories as a bishop and a writer.

The whole narrative of the biographical novel is composed as the existence of a human being in a liminal situation, as approaching the threshold between life and death, like a monologue of a dying patient's consciousness, "wandering" of memory into the past: "the bishop returned to his shelter of darkness. He liked his present wandering in the fields of his youth, picking up those first roots of his great works, the sprouts. Where was that turning point when he faced these works? Probably, when he moved up to St Petersburg with Vilnius Theological Academy" (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 33), as contemplation of the whole path of life and spiritual leadership.

This artistic decision of the author-narrator allows the reader to view the hero of the Lithuanian culture as a solitary man tormented by a liver disease, separated by time and tsarist government expatriation from his fellows (bishop Ignas Holovinskis, Juozapas Dovydaitis, Aleksandras Beresnevicus), remaining only with himself, his own books, faith and the only loyal servant Fortunatus. The conversation between Motiejus Valancius and Fortunatus, the only close friend remaining alive in this life journey, reveals the intention of the main character to contemplate upon the human life and its purpose. The idea typical of the modern romantic literary thought that human life is uncertainty is formulated in the biographical novel: "And what a human being is, indeed, he does not know it well himself" (Jasaitis 2005: 24). It is worth bearing in mind here Algirdas Julius Greimas' words about friendship: "if [a man is] successful, s/he has two or three friends <...> there is little more to desire from life" (Greimas, 1991, p. 280).

Contemplation of the whole life from the perspective of time creates a critical self-approach of the character, enables one to see one's human vices (the death scene with Antanas Baranauskas, who administers the Last Anointment, then Valancius admits he has abandoned his fellow Daukantas). The critical self-perception of the main character in the biographical novel is related to the confession of his guilt and the motif of Christian repentance: "<...> I would like to confess my two sins which I regret. I put into the wrong and offended my fellow old Daukantas. I broke my word that I had given him: I did not ensure his well-being in a venerable age. I did not publish his stories. Moreover, it is my fault that the first ones who had undertaken to spread the Lithuanian printed word — ordinary people, priests — were ensnared by the tsarist gendarme. <...> I beg them all

and all my sheep as well to forgive me, whereas the Lord, I beg Him to forgive me all my sins” (Jasaitis, 2005, 133–134). The scene of the Last Anointment of gravely ill bishop Valancius is followed by an eloquent dream where the main character sees the idyll of the past that symbolizes reconciliation of the main character with the world and himself, the junction between the past and the present: the hill of Zemaiciai, shepherds frolicking in the shadows of trees.

The meditation of the dramatic life of the main character, bishop Valancius is self-observation, the path to the self, circular movement of memory, return to the past, silent confession of the whole life to God and the Lithuanian nation in the presence of the approaching leave of the world, when such questions as to whether I was useful to the Lithuanian nation, will people remember my feats and works, whether my life was meaningful are constantly raised. Memory as the sign of the meaning and legacy of life is very important for the main character of the novel.

The memories of the dying character, Motiejus Valancius, are envisaged by a poetic topos of a spiritual flight, well known in European poetic self-perception (Horatius, Sarbievius, Mickevicius, Maironis) and symbolizing “the transfer from conditional existence to unconditional existence, i.e. total freedom” (Eliade, 1997, p. 123) thus meaning “the possibility to move according to one’s will” (Eliade, 1997, p. 124): “today by taking farewell I had a flight throughout my life” (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 131). The topos of the flight of the soul envisages the spiritual state of the main character of the biographical novel, the bishop Motiejus Valancius, who is ill, his detachment from the triviality of everyday life; it signifies the aspiration for the transcendental existence. At the end of the biographical novel, this flight of the soul is transformed into the vision of the main character, namely, the allegory of the throne of God: “He knows — there, in a splendid throne, surrounded by angels and saints God sits. He has known him from scriptures so far, the books of the Old Testament <...> Now he will see him with his own eyes for the first time and will stand against his bright face” (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 138).

The author-narrator inserts authentic works by Motiejus Valancius into the reminiscences of the life of the main character. In the novel, the character asks his loyal fellow Fortunatus to read him his Preface to “Zemaiciu vyskupyste/ Bishopric of Zemaiciai”, a chapter from the book about Varniai Cathedral, the funeral of bishop J.A. Giedraitis, extracts from “Biographies of Saints’ Lives”, “Juze from Palanga”, “Children’s Book”, “Pastoral Letters” about the necessity of soberness and matrimonial diplomacy. The biographical novel “The Shepherd” contains a scene created by Juozas Jasaitis where Fortunatus’ reading of Valancius’ texts aloud indicates an important function of the genre, i.e. memorization, reminding of the biographical tradition in Antiquity when depiction of the public life of a person was

prevailing. To put it in Mikhail Bakhtin's words, even St. Augustine's "Confessions" were intended to be recited aloud. Their form features the "alive spirit of a Greek square where the self-perception of a European man was firstly highlighted" (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 85). Motiejus Valancius' works, especially "Pastoral Letters" are related to oral tradition. They were not dedicated to silent reading to oneself but rather to spread the idea of Catholicism publicly. Therefore, the mentioned scene from the novel is an organic reflection of the specificity of Motiejus Valancius' works that joins together oral and written traditions.

Self-perception of the main character of the biographical novel *The Shepherd* is based on the idea of Motiejus Valancius' whole life: how to preserve catholic faith, that spiritual reality that serves as a foundation for existence of both an individual and a nation. This, according to Algirdas Julius Greimas, is "the most important stimulus and guarantee of a human and national activity" (Greimas, 1991, p. 420). The dominant theme of the catholic faith in the novel *The Shepherd* is strengthened by a constant echo of *Te Deum laudamus* praising the existence of God.

The literary portrait of Motiejus Valancius created in the biographical novel acquires peculiarities of a historical person. Algirdas Julius Greimas wrote that there is no absolute history, "there is only one History – the human one" (Greimas, 1991, p. 420). The novel provides the picture of Motiejus Valancius as a humanly, caring, father-like bishop (bishop's communication with bishopric children, a scene with the little Johny, future Maironis). According to the historian Alekna, young Motiejus Valancius, while teaching children in Kraziai gymnasium, "revealed earnest obedience to his duties, earned attachment from his pupils, took care to maintain their morality unblemished. He loved children as a real mother. Priest Hieronimas Rackauskas, a pupil of Valancius, also acknowledges Valancius' pedagogical talents. Love of children and youth, in general, is evident throughout the whole life of Valancius" (Alekna, 1975, p. 8).

At the same time, Valancius is depicted as a wise diplomat, experienced politician, representative of silent resistance capable of social navigation, becoming small among the small ones, being the spiritual shepherd of the whole nation, not only aristocrats, noblemen but also of ordinary Lithuanian peasants. According to the historian Vytautas Merkys, "Valancius' insight that namely Lithuanian peasantry (and minor noblemen), not noblemen-landlords determine nationality and turn to be the main support for the Church has been historically approved. <...>" (Merkys, 1999, p. 782). The notion of Lithuanian nature formulated by Algirdas Julius Greimas in his article "To be a Lithuanian" is worth remembering to determine the nature of Motiejus Valancius', who avoided manifestations of radical nationalism and direct conflict, national activity as it is depicted in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Jasaitis. Algirdas Julius Greimas claims

that “to be a minority, a representative of minority, does not only mean to preserve one’s feeling of national pride. It also means to adapt to the majority, insert oneself into that majority to develop one’s personal and national possibilities. <...> Only these individuals survive who can find their place in the surrounding society without selling themselves. Only these national minorities survive <...> that have historical awareness and historical patience. The wisdom of the Lithuanian nation is to know how to wait” (Greimas, 1991, p. 322). The biographical novel constantly emphasizes the harmony of the catholic faith and Lithuanian nature spread by bishop Valancius (the evangelical parable of sowing). In Vytautas Merkys’ words, “the peculiarity of Valancius’ phenomenon is the understanding of the harmony between the Lithuanian nature and the catholic faith and its historical perspective. <...> Neither before Valancius nor long after him, there was any bishop capable of such insight. On the contrary, his successors “reclined” to the past and strengthened their relations to the noblemen, thus partially destroying Valancius’ achievements” (Merkys, 1999, p. 783).

The biographical novel by Jasaitis contains many biographical details from Valancius’ life that emerge in the consciousness of the character: memories of Kraziai school, life in Varniai, Vilnius seminaries, being a priest in Mazyr, period of expatriation in Kaunas when the bishop was forbidden by the tsarist government to attend to other Lithuanian parishes. The biographical novel gives hints about the cultural -Lithuanian activity of Zemaiciai in Vilnius university at the end of the 19th century.

Mikhail Bakhtin claimed that the chronotope of the meeting is typical of the novel of the genre (Bakhtin, 1975, p. 247). The main character in the biographical novel — bishop Valancius — remembers many meetings he has had in his life. For instance, when Motiejus Valancius meets a student from Vilnius University, Simonas Stanevicius, and Jurgis Plioteris in the yard of Petras Skarga and all three discuss the future paths of the revival of the Lithuanian nation. Famous ode by Simonas Stanevicius “Fame of Zemaiciai” is weaved into the cloth of the narrative, yet, to tell the truth, the author-narrator quotes those stanzas that speak about the love to mother tongue and belief in the life of the nation.

The world of Antiquity becomes alive in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis, which is based on romantic Christian poetics. Not only does the genre memory of the novel *The Shepherd* reaches the age of Antiquity, but the narrative itself also contains many Latin quotations signifying civil and moral content: “And now the government hung a golden cross on Valancius which he had never worn. In his journal he made a note in Latin: Beware Danaas bearing gifts” (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 33). Motiejus Valancius’ life in Mozyr, the very border of Gudya (cont. Belarus) is described in the following words: “he felt here as if expatriated from home and desired to come back there. A roman sentence *Patria fumus igne aliena lucen-*

tor swirled in his head, i.e. smoke from fatherland is dearer than foreign fire. Therefore, he was overjoyed when the bishop of Zemaiciai, Giedraitis, managed to get him a place as a teacher in Kraziai gymnasium” (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 30).

The whole life of Motiejus Valancius in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* is put into one day. It is symbolical that the beginning of the novel reaches its ending as if the narrative moved in a cyclical manner of time when the topos of an approaching spring morning, so significant in the literary and historical self-perception of Lithuania and Lithuanians in the 19th century, becomes the unifying axis.

There is much of light, glitter, and chastity – symbolism of the divine existence – in the biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis. It seems as if the author-narrator warily formulates the idea that the life of bishop Motiejus Valancius is a constant penetration from the world of darkness into the light. Farewell to the earthly world is envisaged as a raising up of a flyer towards the world of eternal light: “Books fall from under the armpit and scatter on the path. He flies over the town – the Dominican monastery and the new church withdraw in the distance” (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 137).

The biographical novel *The Shepherd* by Juozas Jasaitis might be treated as a literary document of the 19th-century Lithuanian culture and history that helps to get acquainted with not only the text of Motiejus Valancius life and works but also with the socio-historical and cultural situation of the mid-19th century Lithuania. Yet, most importantly, the author-narrator has composed a portrait not of a historical hero but that of a *human being* – bishop Motiejus Valancius – who is physically tired yet spiritually resistant, who claimed “he could die for the faith” (Jasaitis, 2005, p. 109).

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