

# CONSTANTS AND VARIANTS IN GENETIC CRITICISM



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BOLOGNA 9TH-11TH MAY 2024**

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# The Tiny Piece of Paper as a Mimetic Agent

Dovilė Gervytė

## Abstract

In the reconstruction of the avant-texte, genetic scholars typically focus their attention on manuscripts in which versions of the work in question are recorded. However, other types of documents, although not directly related to the work, may have been vital in the writing process. Analysing the relationship between the publication and its surrounding, strictly speaking biographical, materials suggests that the text of work originates from a complex social contract. Peter L. Shillingsburg has pointed out that McGann and McKenzie's concept of the social contract may have implications beyond the author-publisher relationship. In line with this suggestion, we propose to conceptualise the interaction between publication and the archival documents as the 'mimetic contract'. In light of this discussion, the present article examines the archival materials of Lithuanian modernist writer Jurgis Kunčinas (1947–2002).

Despite literary critics' precautions against relying on the author's life when interpreting their work, readers nevertheless fall to this temptation when a book is a love story, and the photograph on the cover is the image of a woman. This is the effect experienced by the reader of *Tūla*, the famous novel written by the prominent Lithuanian writer, translator, and

cultural figure Jurgis Kunčinas (1947–2002).<sup>1</sup> The book was first published in 1993 and was an instant success; later, it was included in the school curriculum and has not lost its popularity yet. On the surface, it is a story of grief: the narrator — a middle aged man — remembers his young love who has recently passed away. The deeper tissues of the narrative reflect daily life of Lithuanian bohemia as it was constrained by the Soviet regime. It is the author's lover whose picture and nickname — 'Tūla' — was put on the front cover of the first publication (see Figure 1).

For Lithuanian audiences, the novel is shrouded in a legend that Kunčinas wrote the whole story in one sitting, two weeks in total. A glimpse into the author's archive, however, reveals that the shoot for this book began spreading at least twenty-four years before its first publication. How can an archival detail prompt an unexpected view of the clichés surrounding the 'classic' novel?

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<sup>1</sup> Kunčinas made his debut as a poet in 1977. Other poetry collections followed in the 1980s, including *Atidėtas rugsėjis* (*September Postponed*, 1984) and *Liepų ratas* (*Linden Circle*, 1988). In 1989, Kunčinas published his first collection of short stories, *Vaizdas į mėnulį* (*View to the Moon*). This book was published by 'Vaga', a reputable publishing house in Lithuania at the time, although the book did not receive the critical acclaim and popularity. It was the second novel, *Tūla*, published in 1993, which won the prestigious prize of the Lithuanian Writers' Union as the book of the year and established Kunčinas as a modernist writer among both critics and general readers. It is worth noting that, at the same time as his original novels were being published, the author was also working as a translator of modern German works (e.g., Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Elias Canetti). His other major original prose includes *Glisono kilpa* (*Gleason Loop*, 1992), *Laba diena, pone Enrike!* (*Good day, Mr Enrike!* 1996), *Blanchisserie, arba Žvėrynas-Užupis* (*Blanchisserie, or Žvėrynas-Užupis*, 1997), *Bilė ir kiti* (*Billie and others*, 2002).

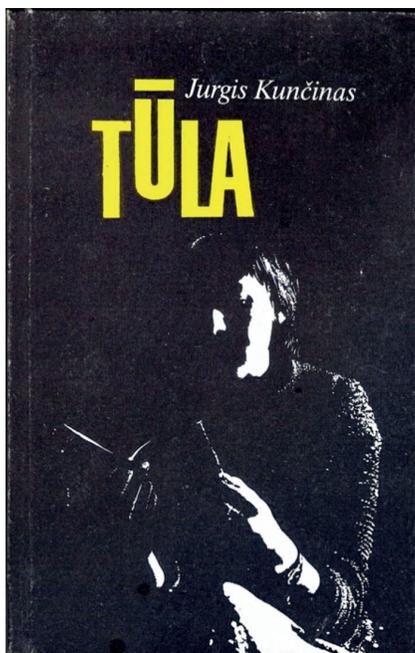


Figure 1: the front cover of Jurgis Kunčinas' second novel *Tūla*, published by the Lithuanian Writers' Union Publishing House in 1993. The artist of the book — Valentinas Ajauskas.

In January 2024, the Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art acquired an extensive collection of Kunčinas' papers. Since the 1960s, the writer has meticulously catalogued his manuscripts, documenting almost forty years of his creative life.<sup>2</sup> The manuscripts contain drafts of early poetry, short stories, and seminal novels, as well as translations of

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank the author's wife, Rasa Kunčinienė, and the former director of the archive, Juozapas Blažiūnas, for their relentless help with accessing and navigating Kunčinas' papers.

German literature, plans for the future writings, and authorial illustrations, correspondence. Incidentally, none of the editorial comments and suggestions on Kunčinas' manuscripts can be found in the more than two hundred files in the author's archive. Does this mean that the creative process of Kunčinas has nothing to contribute to the study of how the agents of genesis interact?

Of course, the absence of material traces does not necessarily mean that there was no editorial intervention at all. Rather, the answer to this problem depends on our definition of what textual agency is and how it functions. For that matter, Peter L. Shillingsburg has proposed, that «texts are socially determined, not just in the contract between author and production crew but also from its conception and in its composition» (Shillingsburg, 1997, 138). In other words, the social determination of text concerns the stages of arriving at work's conception, when the first drafts were composed. If the author, editor, or publisher are not the only subjects who determine the text, who does then? Is it necessarily a 'who'? As Shillingsburg phrased, the text itself is a part of «the complex social, political, and economic forces that determine life» (139). As «the social complex makes the book», the latter can be conceived as «a meaningful agent itself».

When composing, the author reimagines and interprets textual materials, whether originating from the writer themselves or works produced by others. This authorial creative act, imbued with the capacity to version a text (any text), can be understood as an instance of mimesis at work. As textual versions are generated, the specific genetic rela-

tionship between materials of the *avant-texte* is formed. We coin the term ‘mimetic contract’ for this genetic relationship and ascribe to it the function of denoting the degree of change in the textual fabric across versions, thereby binding the text of the work regardless of the nature of documents. It is through the study and interpretation of mimetic contracts that the geneticist can define how the agency of the text operates in the *avant-texte*.

We would like to illustrate the concept of the mimetic contract by examining Kunčinas’ archive. A small piece of paper has been preserved in the folder that the author used to keep his correspondence. This paper contains two short sentences (see Figure 2). The first sentence is handwritten in blue ballpoint pen and reads: «Please don’t write to me.». The second sentence is below, typed. It explains that the note above was written in 1981 by Gražina Jaronytė, who was nicknamed ‘Tūla’ by the author, and adds: «After that I stopped writing to Her.».

Let us consider this document as an object in its own right: the paper is a short note from the author’s lover, Gražina Jaronytė. Her nickname ‘Tūla’, which means ‘ordinary person’ in Lithuanian, appears in dedications of many of Kunčinas’ early writings. The paper in our focus was written by Jaronytė presumably to break off her relationship with the writer. We have already mentioned that Kunčinas was in the habit of thoroughly cataloguing his materials and adding retrospective comments to them. The letter — or, rather, a harsh note from a woman — was no exception. It is likely that sometime after receiving the note, Kunčinas was organizing his workspace when he came across this pa-

per. The writer clipped it (as he did with all the materials he catalogued), then typed the explanatory sentence and stuck the paper into the archival folder. Thus, as an entity in the author's archive, this document can be rationalized in two ways: first, it is a letter (or note) from a person known to the author, and second, it is a paper typed over by the author to explain the circumstances of its contents.

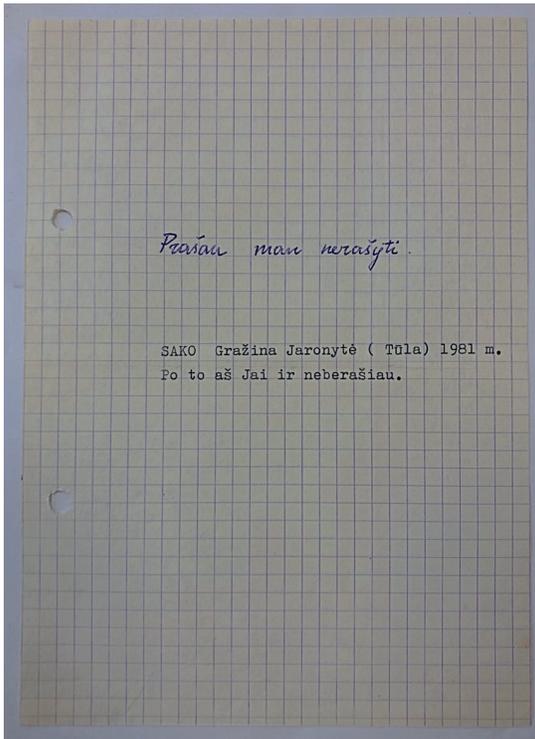


Figure 2: a short note to Kunčinas, supposedly from Gražina Jaronytė, with a typed author's inscription. Approximately A5 format. Jurgis Kunčinas Papers (F. 799), Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art, uncatalogued.

Needless to say, the woman the author knew and the character of the same name in the novel *Tūla* are not to be equated by the reader of the book in question. It is worth noting that the reader of the novel, in our case a genetic scholar, may have a different approach to the paper than an archivist. There is more to the manuscript note than to classify it as a mere ephemera, as a letter that refers to a private life. If the geneticist were to mention the archival paper with the word 'Tūla' on it to a Lithuanian audience, the distinctive character, the tragic love story, would immediately conjure up. In other words, there is a strong tradition of invoking the metaphors and literary images of the novel in everyday Lithuanian usage (see Figure 3). The question arises as to how the knowledge of the fictional world of the book facilitates the analysis of archival documents, which are supposed to be interpreted with prudence.

In the ninth chapter of the novel, the narrator recounts how he was forcibly imprisoned, allegedly because of his drinking problems. In reality, the Soviet police were tasked with patrolling the streets of Vilnius, where the novel is set, and clearing them of the homeless and dipsomaniacs. Reflecting on the absurdity of his situation, the narrator tells the reader that the only thing that helped him get through prison was writing letters to Tūla, a young art student with whom he was in love at the time: «Once more I wrote and wrote to you, but it was only in the late autumn [...] that your second-to-the-last letter came; it wasn't at all difficult to memorize it: "Please don't write to me. Tūla." Of course,

I answered right away.»<sup>3</sup> Let us focus on two aspects of this passage: the words Tūla (the character) wrote in her letter to the narrator (‘Please don’t write to me.’), and the narrator’s reaction to it (‘Of course, I answered right away.’). In view of these two aspects, we would like to bring the paragraph of the novel into line with the previously mentioned manuscript note.

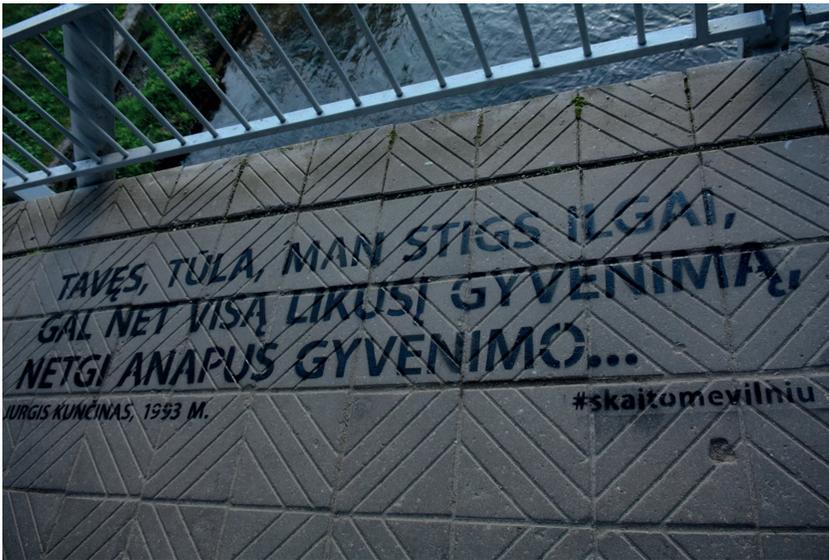


Figure 3: a quote from *Tūla* graffitied on the pavement of the bridge near the Vilnius Academy of Arts, the place where the character Tūla lives in the novel. This graffiti is part of the Vilnius City Council’s social initiative #skaitomevilniu [‘we read vilnius’]. In 2016–2017, various quotations from famous Lithuanian works were painted throughout the city, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOABdVY6Gg>.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation, by Elizabeth Novickas, was published in 2016; for the quoted passage see: Kunčinas 2016, 143–144. It is worth noting that the novel has been translated into German (2017), Polish (2002), Swedish (2005), see Lithuanian Culture Institute 2024.

When we move from the paper note to the passage in the publication, a connection between the linguistic code of the two documents becomes apparent. This leads to the conclusion that the person the author knew, Gražina Jaronytė, was used to create the character of Tūla in the novel. Moreover, the documents in the author's archive prove that the writer received the note from Jaronytė when he himself was in Soviet prison (a biographical fact). However, the parallel suggested by this line of thought, i.e., author using their life events to compose fiction, is not illuminating. Instead, we would like to take the opposite step and interpret the two documents by moving from the passage in the novel to the manuscript note.

Reading the novel, one attributes the note 'Please don't write to me.' to the character Tūla. As a result of this reader's act, the same phrase in the manuscript note can be considered prototypical. That is, the woman with whom Kunčinas corresponded is no longer the only referent of the manuscript. The knowledge that the character of Tūla is based on the real person encourages the reader of the novel to approach the manuscript note by creating an imaginary situation. That is, to read the manuscript as if it were both conveying the note produced by a real person nicknamed 'Tūla' and enacting the fictional event of the book. The reader of the novel ascribes fictional quality to the exchange of letters between the author and his correspondent. In turn, there is nothing to prevent the reader of the novel from speculating that, as much as the manuscript note was produced in a real-life situation, the paper

note also embodies the narrative act that was crafted to exist only in fiction.<sup>4</sup>

Further, we inspect the second aspect of the quoted passage from the novel, namely the narrator's reaction to Tūla's note: 'Of course, I answered right away'. Be that as it may, the archival paper containing the author's response to the breaking off of his relationship with Jaronytė reveals the opposite of an answer. The author Kunčinas says that he stopped writing to the woman as soon as he received the note. It should be noted that in this archival note the author himself acts as a narrator. The writer explained the situation of the correspondence by typing a comment, and the dimension of narration (and thus fictionalisation) was added to the paper. In this way, Jaronytė's note can be interpreted as a narrative event, even if the actual moment of fictionalising the note meant contextualising it in the pile of other materials. The passage of the novel, in turn, could be seen as the author-narrator elaborating and extending the text of the paper note. Assuming that this note was used to produce the narrative act in the novel, there is nothing to prevent the reader from seeing the manuscript inscription as one created by the novel's narrator.

The author's archive does not suggest that Jaronytė was directly involved in the creation of the novel's text. Moreover, it was only after the woman's tragic death that the author began to work on the book with great intensity. Thus, the underlying principle of the social contract

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Aristotle 1995, 61, 63: «there is nothing to prevent some actual events being probable as well as possible, and it is through probability that the poet makes his material from them».

between the author and his muse is mimesis, and the contract itself can be specified as a mimetic contract. We define the mimetic contract as an intellectual link created by a geneticist between avant-textual materials that reveal different degrees of fictionalisation of a specific narrative event. The mimetic contract between different types of documents is recognised, as they testify to the author modifying the strictly non-fictional manuscript text to make it function as a stand-alone narrative. In turn, mimetic contract exists to the extent that geneticist identifies and finds a way to conceptualize the presence of textual fabrication.

What is the outcome of theorising the relationship between primary materials and their counterparts in fiction? Reading the versions, which differ in their functional, documentary nature, stimulates the geneticist to shift his focus from sporadic changes to consider the impact of the forces that drove the author to produce his writings in the first place; to ask how the acts of writing transform and tame the social. In the case of Kunčinas, the author projected the events of his life onto the text of the novel; conversely, the rudiments of the novel's characters are tangible in the author's correspondence, which is considered non-fiction.

In a way, the application of the mimetic contract to the reading of Kunčinas' novel suggests the impossible, — that the author actually replied to Jaronytė's letter, and that the novel served this purpose. To apply the concept of mimetic contract to the reconstruction of the genesis, then, is to interpret the avant-texte with three things

in mind: what is already there and what has never been there, although this does not mean that something could not have been there at all.

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