

# RIČARDAS GAVELIS' PARANOID GUIDE TO POST-SOVIET VILNIUS



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**SUMMARY.** The aim of this article is to analyze the relationship that the protagonist of Ričardas Gavelis' novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* has to the place, as well as his own paranoid character in post-Soviet reality. Taking into account the previous studies of Gavelis' work, the article applies the theory of topophilic analysis – which has not been used so far to understand the writer's oeuvre – that French literary scholar Gaston Bachelard and his follower Denis Sobolev have developed, along with the methodology that post-modern psychoanalysis (mainly Slavoj Žižek) offers, which allows us to arrive at a number of propositions that significantly complement the literary treatment of the writer's last piece.

The Lithuanian writer Ričardas Gavelis is best known to readers in the Western world as the author of the novel *Vilnius Poker*. According to many reviewers of the book and numerous scholars who have studied it in Lithuania and other countries, this work is a phantasmagoric epic of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet eras.

Gavelis still represents, and is identified in Lithuania and in post-Soviet space with, a specific type of author who is characterized by isolation from social life, lockdown in his own home, and writing based on his previous experience of self-isolation and inwardness. This kind of writer does not maintain any communication with the outside world and, in a sense, is antisocial – but at the same time, he does not lack the ambition to make his life meaningful by writing and to write into a literary history that may one day recognize such an author as a classic.

**KEYWORDS:** postcolonialism, deconstruction, antitopophilia, paranoid, post-Soviet protagonist.

## POST-COLONIAL AND DECONSTRUCTIVE RESEARCH OF GAVELIS' WORKS

Violeta Kelertas, professor at the University of Illinois in the USA, was the first in the world and in Lithuanian literary studies to take an analytical look at Gavelis' work. She was also the first to undertake the translation of Gavelis' writings into English. In studies that are significant for Gavelistics, the literary scholar draws on post-colonial theory and thus reveals the following type of colonized person in Gavelis' work: post-Soviet, tortured by schizophrenia and the feelings of fear and shame, intellectual, physically and sexually more capable than many others. The scholar was also one of the first to draw attention to the genre mix in Gavelis' writings: they are similar to classic horror, detective, urban, maturation, search,

philosophical, post-colonial, and postmodern novels. According to Kelertas, it is Gavelis' mastery of combining the textual features of these genres that creates the uniqueness and significance of the writer's work by means of synthesis. The literary critic unequivocally states (and this statement is confirmed by Gavelis' personal notes) that the writer constructed the plots and characters of his works as schemes that, thanks to the author's inner power, became alive in his novels and, at the same time, were detrimental to that aliveness, or destructive (Kelertienė 2006).

Many American literary scholars undertook to continue her work after Kelertas' research, but perhaps the most important subsequent research of Gavelis' writings has been the monograph dissertation "Deconstruction in Ričardas Gavelis' Prose", prepared and presented by Jūratė Čerškutė, Lithuanian Doctor of Humanities. In her dissertation, she covers the entire creative biography of the author under research and, based on the highly philosophical-literary theory of deconstruction, analyzes the ways in which, in Gavelis' short stories and novels, the narrator proper deconstructs himself, Vilnius, and the whole of reality.

In speaking about Gavelis' novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius*, Čerškutė noticed and extensively examined the following important aspect: the deconstructive personality of the characters and their irony as a principle of interaction between characters encompassing the whole novel. Summing up, the author of the dissertation claims that Gavelis' last novel is a hieroglyph of his whole creative biography – a perfect quintessence, a generalization, and a logical finale (Čerškutė 2014: 235–248).

#### GAVELIS' ANTITOPHILIA

There is probably no other author in Lithuanian and Central and Eastern European literature who would reveal the social grimaces of post-Soviet Vilnius as precisely and ruthlessly as Gavelis has done. After 1990, Lithuania and its capital are trying to get rid of, and survive in, the rudiments of the Soviet order, as well as change the very logic of life in the country. Gavelis does not follow the path chosen by the psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, who has stated that in attempting to forget an event or a phenomenon or a person, one succeeds best when one remembers it very accurately and vividly (Žižek 2010: 1–110). Gavelis' work is not psychodramatic. Its tragedy, and at the same time, the source of the author's great creativity, is the fact that after the occupation of Lithuania by Soviet Russia, one wants to forget individual fragments of reality, but also the whole of reality, along with one's entire previous life. His protagonist calls this reality and his living presence a total set of

prostheses that seeks to take over the world: “It’s really not pleasant to always feel like just a prosthesis or a yellow hyena. That was exactly why I so suddenly, and to the surprise of many, escaped the halls of state“ (Gavelis 2019: 198).

The French culturologist Gaston Bachelard has called topophilia a person’s love for a place that is his/her own, protected and worshipped. In addition, the scholar notes that topophilic texts are often characterized by poetry as a literary expression of that love (Bachelard 1993).

In Gavelis’ novel *Sun-Tzu’s Life in the Holy City of Vilnius*, the author creates such a relationship with the city of Vilnius that it becomes impossible to talk about love for the place: it is hated and wanted to be rejected, but in other places and cities the novel’s plot does not develop. He constructs the twists of the plot of the novel in such a way that the changes in the city and its historicity force the character to go through various unfavorable experiences and negative emotions. Vilnius, on the other hand, is the place one needs to comprehend rather than love: it seems to the character that the city is hiding something. That is why a number of chapters of the novel are written in such a way that the action develops in the underground rather than in the above-ground city, which is unbearable, as ghosts, in the literary tradition, usually cannot bear the daylight. In the underground, the main character of *Sun-Tzu’s Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* feels safer, and it is here that he accumulates his own collections of various objects and body parts. In above-ground Vilnius, the most important are two districts – Karoliniškės and the Oldtown. The first one is impossible to love and even to tolerate, because frog orchestras are constantly croaking there. The “music” that they spread is the scariest and most hated example of this art to the character, expressing his manic hatred for both those frogs and, at the same time, for femininity. The character says the following about the frogs, „So I had to suffer their cacophonous cry. And I did suffer, suffered for an unbearably long time“ (Gavelis 2019: 72). Another place where Karoliniškės spreads music is the approaches to the rubbish bins in this district: here, the largest orchestra ever seen by the character consists of many flies, whose melody dominates Vilnius. Former ministers in the area appear to be very similar to intolerable and hated dogs: “That dog immediately reminded me of Minister Mureika; he was equally as huge, equally as scruffy <...> Mureika used to scurry around enemy territory in the exact same way, sniffing everything and mercilessly urinating on everything” (Gavelis 2019: 222). The Oldtown is more familiar to the unnamed character of the novel, because it is his birthplace. But that familiarity leads the protagonist to even stronger hatred of the city than of its new residential areas. Thus, the regularity is almost obvious: the more familiar the part of the city is to the protagonist, the more he hates it.

One of the reasons for such hatred, which prevents the character's topophilic relationship with place from developing, may be the fact that he does not experience any space as his own, belonging to him and dependent on him. In the late Soviet era, it was legally and ideologically impossible to even talk about private property. The character is so strong and driven by inner beliefs that he does not deceive himself into owning places and objects that do not belong and cannot belong to him – there is no self-deception. In the early post-Soviet era, the protagonist of the novel only owns the underground rooms, as he is under real or imagined threat in above-ground restaurants and other public places. The character of the work is not under control of a passion for property, so he does not accumulate material goods that would allow him to have a lot of money and buy a house in the city – and to bond with the place by means of ownership.

The topophilia in the novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* is impossible and turns into its opposite also because no place in the Lithuanian capital is safe for the character. In Karoliniškės, he is persecuted by nature and its discomforts, while in the Oldtown, the agents of the security service persecute him. The character repeatedly experiences moments of danger when it seems to him that he has been exposed and posed under the threat of infighting. The protagonist gets used to thinking this way after the death of his father, when the murderers cut off the head of the victim and the protagonist carries it around stuffed when participating in the rallies of the Lithuanian Revival period. According to a participant of the rallies, the nation, whom the protagonist quite cynically refers to as “puppets”, could have called that stuffed head its own totem, or even something more: “Father's head gave off the scent of painterly calm; it seemed to me as if it felt it weren't just a tribe's totemic symbol, but was a macabre work of art as well” (Gavelis 2019: 137–138). Once he retreats to the underground, security is also only conditional: here, the protagonist and his like-minded people, whom he has just a few of, feel that they can be tracked down and destroyed at any time, too. The danger that the protagonist of Gavelis' last novel faces takes on a metaphysical nature: living is so unsafe that one must not relax and calm down even for a single moment.

The lack of tangible real estate and the constant danger to the protagonist of the novel does not allow him to worship any place. The adoration of place in Gavelis' novel, which is characteristic of the topophilic relationship, turns into contempt for Vilnius. This feeling is supported by the events that take place without interruption, the episodes of which the narrator of Gavelis' novel creates as causing revulsion, disgust, and nausea. One of the first images of this kind is the antisocially behaving disabled war invalids in terrible wheelchairs: “In a manner my childish brain couldn't understand, they tied their stubby little bodies to homemade carts and furiously pushed on forward” (Gavelis 2019: 97). In Vilnius, everything

is disgusting: from dogs and flies to buildings and people. This allows us to talk about the nauseating poetics created by the novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius*, which bring it close to the French Romantic tradition: in both cases, the feelings are so strong that they free the reader from indifference and make him/her experience the whole disgusting reality of Paris or Vilnius almost personally.

In the classical novel tradition, the character's relationship to the place, topophilic feelings, and their expression serve as a means of belonging in a concrete, tangible reality. Often such a place is the homeland, motherland or native land. The protagonist of Gavelis' novel in question hates his homeland, motherland, and native land. He strives to disbelong with his last ounce of strength, to free himself from the sentimental, deceptive, and even insidious topophilic experience of reality. His native places seem to him so terrible and intolerable that, instead of escapism, he chooses suffering that almost reaches the extremes beyond which the enjoyment of physical and spiritual hardship is now lying.

In his last novel, Gavelis has created such a protagonist and located him in such a place that has no historicity from which topophilia could normally begin. The main character of *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* is a person without his own history or a beloved place. It is interesting to compare the topophilic relationship of Lithuanian post-war exiles with the places of their lost homeland: being displaced persons, they tried their best not to lose their sentiment to the native land and at least a nostalgic relationship with it. Meanwhile, Gavelis' character is a person without a real, but also even without an imaginary, beloved homeland. His imagination does not create longings or other gentle feelings, but instead, builds experiences reminiscent of American action movies that destroy his factual, but also past-dictated bonds to the place. The protagonist of Gavelis' novel has not lost his homeland, because he just never had it – he always hated it. Gavelis has complemented the classic definition of the status of a displaced person in the middle of the 20th century with a character of the end of the century without a **beloved** place. The next step in such a relationship is emigration, therefore we could conditionally refer to the protagonist's departure to the Vilnius underground as to his separation from the hated homeland, motherland and native land.

#### THE CHARACTER AND (POST) SOVIET REALITY

The fact that everything must be forgotten determines the special psychological type of Gavelis' characters, which is similar to the psychological characteristics of a maniac or paranoid. In the initial episodes of the novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy*

*City of Vilnius*, the character seems to be attacked by even snails that he is eating with his wife in a luxurious Vilnius restaurant: “Their little horns, on whose tips the metaphysical eyes were hiding, writhed somewhat like underwater seaweed. I immediately felt like I was under water, and started gasping helplessly for air. Those snails were intentionally drowning me” (Gavelis 2019: 24). The protagonist of Gavelis’ novels seeks a way out, as do the people who have reached rock bottom – the ones who can no longer tolerate the reality in which they find themselves, but most of all, their own selves. Their hatred of themselves causes almost uncontrollable destruction of the novel characters, until they find it necessary to retreat from everyday social reality to the underground – which, unlike in Soviet times, is no longer related to the partisan struggle for the country’s independence: it means the individuals’ own struggle for their highly questionable freedom and right to live or, even more so, to consciously choose to commit suicide. It is the thinking and inspiration of a person driven by the power to do evil, because doing evil is sweet: “The geometry of the Universe is ruled by an inherent pain: the more complexity and hidden harmony you find in the world, the less meaning you find in it. This pain torments the world of human society even more intensely. Its alleged meaning must simply be invented – and so we defined the key postulates of our lives: to do evil is sweet. As sweet as honey” (Gavelis 2019: 177).

Gavelis’ novel *Sun-Tzu’s Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* and his other works have been attracting readers as a testimony to the early capitalism of Lithuania and the entire post-Soviet space, which is reminiscent of both the state of society and the individual during that period, as well as the inexhaustible search for meaning of suffering.

The social reality of people stems from its interpretations, the totality of which we refer to as the concepts of reality, or symbolic worlds. These are filled with two phenomena: words and images. Gavelis’ novel *Sun-Tzu’s Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* is a classic example of the complete and absolute rejection of the symbolic world. That which the protagonist identifies with the late Soviet era is only his early, adolescent sexual experiences of observing his mother (whom he refers to as “Gorgeous Rožė”) undressing: “My naked mother was stunningly beautiful: all the parts of her perfect body were just where they ought to be” (Gavelis 2019: 42)), his disabled neighbor named Irena, and his naked peer and classmate Sara Mejerovič, who dies before her parents emigrate, as the teenage character believes, from his gaze at her vagina (“I had sucked out Sara’s soul and destroyed her with my fatal gaze” (Gavelis 2019: 114)). The fact that the protagonist has the innate talents of an artist does not concern him at all: he tends to deny the possibility of becoming a creator, as he is destined to become a destroyer, calling himself “young Da Vinci”, who does not realize any of his talents as an inborn artist. Each of his

actions as a young artist only serves to open up his even greater inner emptiness: “The more and the prettier the vases I drew, the deeper and the blacker that wretched emptiness within me spread” (Gavelis 2019: 49). Thus, all that the young character of the novel experiences before the age of maturity are mostly images, all of which are connected into a single system by the figure of the father. The latter has withdrawn from the late Soviet social reality and has been engaged in collecting objects and human bodies, animals and shellfish that are interesting to him. The main character of the novel has almost no verbal experience until the proclamation of Lithuania’s independence in the last decade of the 20th century. It is for this profound reason that he cares neither to develop a relationship other than hatred with Soviet life, nor to give any sense to his own self in any way. After the Soviet special services killed the protagonist’s father, the son has remained the victim’s head. He is involved in the adventure of his youth – leading the Lithuanian independence restoration movement – by his stepfather, or the second father, as his stepson calls him. The power given to him by his stepfather Aleksas to act is extremely actively, vigorously, and even passionately supported by his mother. The character is repeatedly portrayed speaking to, as he calls it to himself, a crowd of insane fanatics. This is probably the only activity in his life that has required verbal communication. Later, at the historical stage of the development of early Lithuanian capitalism, the character withdraws from society and, in just a few phrases, imagines communicating with the inhabitants of the underground. The end of the novel, when the character sees his mother for the last time, states that in human society, the character never had anything to do. When asked why he did not turn his wife into the country’s first lady, the character replies, “I chose a completely different way, Mom” (Gavelis 2019: 262). His early sexual passion later evolved into a lust for power, which the character inherited from his second father, Aleksas, who enjoyed unlimited power – sexual, material, political, and psychological (“The years I spent in government reconciled me to Aleksas. His slimy wormish knowledge about all possible, past, and future government corridors and hideouts came in very handy to me” (Gavelis 2019: 116)), the experiences of gambling (the character gambles away his wife in a game of cards) and finally turned into an indifference full of quiet hatred. The whole life of the character lies in a few dozens of images that he experiences in the late Soviet period and early during independence that the novelist Gavelis has talentedly painted in almost every episode of the novel. The images have no power to relate because, unlike words, they remain in the character’s consciousness, which no one can penetrate. Probably that is the reason why Gavelis took the option to tell this novel in the first person singular: in that case, no objective narrator can invade the thinking of the main character who coincides with the narrator. According to the character, the vast majority of people think by using not their heads,



but rather, their gut brain, which does not generate verbal thoughts – its product only consists of desires. According to Professor Levas Kovarskis, who gives advice to the main character, “Everyone’s fascinated by the secondary brain of the head, but they’ve utterly forgotten the primary brain of the gut” (Gavelis 2019: 152).

The main character of Gavelis’ *Sun-Tzu’s Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* goes underground also because the terrestrial society understands and treats him as a deviation or a divergence from the “normal” post-Soviet social reality, and because he names the constant struggle against society and any Lithuanian sociality in general to be his purpose in life. When, at the end of the novel, the soldiers of the “Aras” secret service combat squad invade the character’s hideout, he suffers the defeat of his entire life, with the only thing left for him to do – a ritual suicide called by the Japanese word “harakiri”. This episode of the novel equates this kind of death with an old Lithuanian legend about the defenders of Pilėnai castle, who, seeing that they are losing the fight against the Crusaders, chose mass suicide. The character of the novel calls his underground by a similar name – “Duobėnai” (playing upon Lithuanian words “pilis” for a castle and “duobė” for a hole in the ground): “Of course our stronghold was first nicknamed Duobėnai, the pits, by Apples Petriukas. Others have their Pilėnai, the castle hill defended against the Teutonic Knights, he liked to explain, while we have our immortal Duobėnai; we are the last defenders of Duobėnai” (Gavelis 2019: 264).

Does the novel protagonist have his own biography? This question arises when we begin to consider why this work came to be. We could call it the protagonist’s autobiography written as a text of complete denial of reality, and a very bold personal resistance to the Soviet and post-Soviet system – resistance that is interesting and accessible to just a few people. Reading *Sun-Tzu’s Life in the Holy City of Vilnius*, we believe that many people who lived in Lithuania at the end of the 20th century had experienced, to varying degrees, the things that the main character of the novel recorded in his story. Those who have gone as far in real life as Gavelis’ character were likely to actually kill themselves or become alcoholics, drug addicts, or suffer from other addictive disorders. The reality was so repulsive that it was impossible to live a fair social life within it. The only possible authentic inner concept of reality that was not self-lying and self-contradictory could have been the rejection of social reality and its slow, methodical destruction. Gavelis’ character is not a traditional dissident who has fought in the Lithuanian freedom struggles, because he already knows that after winning that freedom, the country will hardly change and will remain as it was for a long time to come. The protagonist of the novel is the one who destroys Sovietism with his own withdrawal and personal, non-public contempt and hatred for what he has withdrawn from.



## CONCLUSIONS

Gavelis' novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* allows us to specify that the author, consciously or subconsciously, already knew that this would be his last piece of work. The main character of the novel is betrayed to the officers of the secret combat squad by Artūras Gavelis who is the writer's alter ego and a secondary character. When, with his creative will, the author gives his character to destruction, we might as well say that he himself kills the fruit of his imagination. This means that Ričardas Gavelis, who has taken the form of Artūras Gavelis in his last novel, comes to the following logical conclusion: living in Vilnius is no longer possible, it is the most hated place in the world, whose reality nobody can change in corpore, so the only way out is inner emigration, which means living in an alternative reality that is impossible to protect against the nauseating Soviet and post-Soviet people, including the relationships, social phenomena, and material reality that they create. The protagonist of the novel chooses a struggle, the rules of which he does not detail nor lay down in a comprehensive list, but this struggle takes place in the character's own thinking and feelings rather than in his everyday social reality. Thus *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* speaks of the helplessness of the individual against the social, political, and cultural system. Ritual suicide is the logical end of such a hopeless struggle, after which nothing changes in Vilnius, Lithuania and basically in the world. All of the protagonist's possible choices remain limited to the essential and only answer to the question: to live or to die? The only meaning of such a former life is, in fact, a struggle with oneself in trying to overcome in one's inner self that which one hates so much in the outside world, which is expanding beyond the underground. Almost every episode of the novel is a dead-end situation, whose sequence is interrupted by a willful death. Gavelis' novel *Sun-Tzu's Life in the Holy City of Vilnius* is a biography of a post-Soviet person who has no social connections with other people – it is an antisocial story of hatred of others, which finally destroys the narrator himself.

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Ramūnas Čičelis

## PARANOJIŠKASIS RIČARDO GAVELIO POSOVIETINIS VILNIUS

**SANTRAUKA.** Straipsnyje analizuojamas paskutinis lietuvių rašytojo Ričardo Gavelio romanas „Sun-Tzu gyvenimas šventame Vilniaus mieste“. Pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas kūrinio protagonistos savimonei ir santykiui su Vilniaus miesto tikrove nagrinėti. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariami ankstesnieji tekstai, kuriuose kalbama apie minėtą Gavelio romaną: Violetos Kelertienės pokolonijinių tyrimų ir Jūratės Čerškutės disertacinio dekonstrukcinio darbo išvados. Straipsnio pabaigoje išvedama, kad pagrindinis „Sun-Tzu gyvenimo šventame Vilniaus mieste“ veikėjas yra specifiškai susijęs su pačiu autoriumi ir jo lūpomis perteikiamas galutinis, testamentinis Gavelio pasaulėvaizdis ir atsakymai į viso gyvenimo klausimus: kas nulemia neapykantą Vilniui ir koks yra individo vaidmuo istoriniame kontekste, prie kurio pritapti niekada nesiekta ir net nebandyta? Žmogiškoji būtis Gaveliui – tai permanentinis karas su tikrais ar įsivaizduojamais priešais. Paskutiniame romane ši kova vyksta daugiausia požeminiame, pagrindžio Vilniuje – alternatyvioje autoriaus tikrovėje.

**RAKTAŽODŽIAI:** pokolonializmas, dekonstrukcija, antitopofilija, paranoja, posovietinis personažas.