

The Biography of a Writer as an Argument in (De)Canonisation

Rašytojo biografija kaip (de)kanonizacijos argumentas

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Abstract: Despite the conception of the author's death that was prevalent in the second half of the 20th century, the author's biography always intervenes indirectly in the canonisation process, either *a priori*, as an additional argument for canonisation (e.g. participation in the national movement), or *a posteriori*, when the canonised author acquires, according to Yuri Lotman, the right to a biography. Moreover, biography becomes a significant factor in cases of revising and rewriting the canon, especially when it is related to political changes in society, e.g. in forming a Socialist Realist canon or the case of its radical deconstruction. The focus on biographical texts and authors' biographies increases significantly in the 21st century, when literature itself tries to erase boundaries between fictional and biographical, and literary scholars discuss whether it is possible to separate the author from his or her work in the contexts of the historical memory and *cancel culture*. In this theoretical and historical framework, I discuss the role of the biography in the canonisation and decanonisation of a writer, and consider how these processes and the shift in the cultural paradigm influence interpretations of writers' biographies.

Keywords: literary canon, biography, Soviet-era literature, Salomėja Nėris, Justinas Marcinkevičius.

Anotacija: Nepaisant XX a. antrojoje pusėje vyravusios autoriaus mirties sampratos, rašytojo biografija visada netiesiogiai įsiterpia į kanonizacijos procesą: *a priori* kaip papildomas kanonizacijos argumentas (pvz., dalyvavimas tautiniame judėjime) arba *a posteriori*, kai kanonizuojamas autorius, anot Jurijaus Lotmano,

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įgyja teisę į biografiją. Be to, biografija tampa reikšmingu veiksmu kanono perrastymo ir perrašymo atvejais, ypač kai tai yra susiję su politinėmis permainingomis visuomenėje, pvz., socrealistinio kanono formavimo arba radikalios jo dekonstrukcijos atveju. Dėmesys biografiniams tekstams ir rašytojų biografijoms žymiai išaugo XXI a., pačiai literatūrai bandant ištrinti ribas tarp fikcijos ir biografijos, literatūrologams svarstant, ar *atšaukimo kultūros* ir istorinės atminties kontekste įmanoma atskirti autorių nuo jo kūrinio. Tokiame teoriniame ir istoriniame kontekste aptariu biografijos vaidmenį rašytoją kanonizuojant ir dekanonizuojant, svarstau, kaip šie procesai ir kultūrinės paradigmos kaita veikia rašytojų biografijų interpretacijas.

Raktažodžiai: literatūros kanonas, biografija, sovietmečio literatūra, Salomėja Nėris, Justinas Marcinkevičius.

Introductory remarks

The figure of the author and the biography of the writer, as one of the author's profiles, have had different cultural roles and interpretative potentials in different historical periods (Foucault 1994: 215–217), or, to paraphrase Yuri Lotman, in some epochs, the biography becomes a more significant cultural fact than in others (Lotman 1992: 368). For example, Romanticism is an epoch in which the author, first and foremost the poet, is a subject with a biography, and to have a biography means that the poet's word is equal to his or her deeds (Lotman 1992: 370, 374). Modernism and the paradigm of modern literary theory, initiated by Russian Formalism, persistently sought, if not to eliminate the writer's biography from literature studies as a system, at least to revise it. To paraphrase Yuri Tynianov and his classic article 'On Literary Evolution', the history of literature as one of the canonisation practices should cease to be the history of the literary 'generals' since the study of the literary process as an evolution of forms does not benefit from the knowledge of the caps of the generals or the habits of wearing of uniforms (Tynianov 2019: 267). The high point of this paradigm is the idea of the 'death of the author', which was established in the second half of the 20th century by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes (Foucault 1994; Barthes 1977). The author ceased to be the source of the meaning of the text, his or her intentions can no longer be the starting point of interpretation, and one of the greatest sins of the argumentation has been a so-called biographical fallacy.

The founders and followers of the idea of the author's death have acknowledged that biography, having ceased to be the main interpretative

frame, continues to exist as a supplementary argument for literary history, or as an object of curiosity in 'ordinary culture' (Barthes 1977: 143). Text-centered literary criticism transformed the author into his or her voice in the textual structures, the traces of enunciation, or the point of view, yet allowed him or her to be present as a figure of cultural history while problematising the very status of the author's biography. 'Thus, the biography useful to the literary historian is not the author's curriculum vitae or the investigator's account of his life. The literary historian needs the biographical legend created by the author himself. Only such a legend is a *literary fact*,' claims Boris Tomashevsky (Tomashevsky 2017: 90).

From a contemporary point of view, Tomashevsky narrows the frame of biography as a literary fact. A legend, or biographical myth, is a narrative created by the author himself or herself, 'where accuracy may be sacrificed to the effect, where the demands of narrative continuity may override the balanced, sequential presentation of events in time and where the living facts of the recorded situation are at the mercy of imperfect memory' (Benton 2009: 12), but it is also culturally, socially and politically shaped, interpreted and reinterpreted. It is particularly evident in the case of the inclusion of the writer in the canon and the negotiation of the writer's place in it.

The objectives of this article are twofold: firstly, to discuss the role of the biography in the canonisation and decanonisation of a writer; and secondly, to consider how these processes and the shift in the cultural paradigm influence the interpretations of writers' biographies. The 21st century can perhaps be regarded as the era of the resurrection of the dead author, when the focus on biographical texts significantly increases, literary scholars reconsider the relationship between the biographical and the fictional, and the question arises as to whether it is possible to separate the author from his work.

Biography as a consequence of canonisation and its condition

Including literary work in the literary canon significantly activates the formation of its author's literary biography, and at the same time, its mythologisation. To paraphrase Lotman, in canonisation, the author automatically acquires the right to biography (Lotman 1992).

The writer's name on the cover of a book or at the beginning of a published work is not in itself a biographical reference. The name is not directly linked to the person but to the work, i.e. the author and his or her name are the product of the literary creation (Sapiro 2020). According to Pierre Bourdieu, the name 'can only attest to the identity of the *personality*, as socially constituted individuality, at the price of an enormous abstraction' (Bourdieu 2017: 213).

Nevertheless, when a writer is included in the canon of national or world literature, the reader subsequently recognises his or her name as a metonymy of biography, a condensed narrative of a life. Traditional canonising practices, such as essential awards, high school and university textbooks, and conventional literary histories, help the reader link the name and biography.

According to Bourdieu, the writer has 'a tendency to make himself the ideologist of his own life, by selecting a few significant events to clarify a common purpose, and by creating causal or final links between them that make them coherent' (Bourdieu 2017: 211). The biographer continues the activity of ideological or mythological selection. The media and social networks definitively stereotype this process through the adoption and dissemination of clichés about one or another literary celebrity. Awarding prizes of the highest prestige becomes a strong impetus for such stereotyping. For example, a user of the media and social networks learns that the 2018 Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk is a feminist, a vegetarian, a recluse, and an animal rights activist. Annie Ernaux, the 2022 winner of the same prize, appears in the media as a provincial schoolteacher in France, a feminist, a critic of President Emmanuel Macron, and an active supporter of the ultra-left French presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélançon. Although these descriptions are biographical facts (who can deny that Ernaux was a teacher for a long time?), they function as an impetus for biographical myth-making, beginning with the question 'Who is this writer?'

The choice to publish a literary work under a pseudonym is an attempt to avoid the biographical trap of focusing on the writer's biography instead of the work itself. However, as the case of Romain Gary shows, this avoidance can have the opposite effect: Émile Ajar, under whose name Gary received the second Prix Goncourt in 1975, has become an essential part of Gary's biographical legend.¹

1 The Prix Goncourt can only be awarded once to a writer, but Gary, using a pseudonym, was awarded twice. The case of Émile Ajar is also remarkable because it is a double pseudonym: Romain Gary, as the literary pseudonym of Roman Kacew, is actively involved in the

The portrait of a writer at the beginning of a publication creates a biographical narrative that is much more evident than the name on the cover. The choice of picture may imply an effort of auto-mythologisation if the author chooses his or her visual presentation and *a posteriori* formation of a position in the canon. The Lithuanian writer Antanas Škėma (1910–1961) could be an example of auto-mythologisation. In his photographic portraits he presents himself as a French Existentialist, choosing a pose similar to one of Albert Camus, who is also intertextually significant in Škėma's grand oeuvre *Balta drobulė* (The White Shroud, 1958, one of the central novels in the 20th-century canon of Lithuanian literature). The parallels with the French writer are crucial to Škėma's biographical narrative, which was finally shaped by death: like Camus, Škėma died at almost the same age in a car crash in 1961.

An example of the second case could be Maironis (1862–1932), the central writer of the Lithuanian national movement, whose image is often presented in a depersonalised way, as an official person with distinctive signs of the Church hierarchy (the writer was a Catholic priest) with a stern gaze. This iconographic choice partly reflects Maironis' position as a prophet of the national revival in the field of Lithuanian literature (Šeina 2019: 707–708).²

As I mentioned before, including a writer in the literary canon always produces biography *a posteriori* and fosters biographical interpretations of literature, even if authors like Marcel Proust or the modernist Lithuanian poet Henrikas Radauskas (1910–1970) strictly oppose the biographical interpretation of their works. Claiming to be a poet without a biography, proclaiming the concept of art in opposition to reality, Radauskas nevertheless receives a biographical interpretation of his poetry. According to Marijus Šidlauskas, the narrative of the murder of reality, with which the poet declares the supremacy of art over life, has a biographical motivation. The literary critic quotes a memoir about Radauskas: 'According to his brother, he also had masochistic inclinations: sometimes it was as if he was deliberately trying to annoy his parents, as if he was trying to provoke an unpleasant reaction from them.' Šidlauskas links the

creation of the writer's biographical myth, and the choice of a second pseudonym intervenes in this process. For more, see Lustig 1983.

2 For more on the portrait photographs of Maironis as a representation of his life in the different editions of the collection of poems *Pavasario balsai* (Voices of Spring), see Jankevičiūtė, Vaicekauskas 2019.

poet's personal qualities and biographical details quite directly to his poetic imagination: 'Indeed, in these aesthetic executions of the poet's reality, one can also see masochistic overtones, betrayed by a violent vocabulary and brutally raging metaphors, that draw us into a vertigo of beauty and horror' (Šidlauskas 2010: 336).

However, biography can be an essential factor of canonisation *a priori*, especially in epochs when the literary field has not yet acquired conditional autonomy and is in a close relationship with politics, such as national movements in the 19th century, Soviet and post-Soviet eras, etc. Its prior significance lessens as the literary field becomes less dependent on politics. For example, the canonical position of the prophet or national bard, created during national movements, requires that the candidate not only be a writer of a particular type of work (romantic poetry that promotes national pride, prose that celebrates the beauty and the magnificent history of the homeland, or the like), but should also have a suitable biography, conditioned by social and cultural processes (Lanoux 2001). For a Polish writer, a noble background was an advantage. In contrast, a peasant background was an advantage for a Lithuanian writer or cultural figure, since belonging to the nobility was associated with Polishness, or even a betrayal of the nation's interests (Merkys 1991: 10).

A suitable biography is necessary for national movement writers and their inclusion in the canon. Still, its further development is more or less parallel to the formation of the canonical position, which is always a dynamic process (Šeina 2019: 626), since literature in the period in question is linked to the political goals of the nation, but also has the possibility of artistic autonomy. The above-mentioned Maironis, the central writer of the Lithuanian national movement, who created the position of the national bard, is also a pioneer of modern Lithuanian poetry, which centres on the contradictions and tensions of individual consciousness.

The pre-existing biographical model is very important when the literary field is under total political control. For example, under Stalin's regime, only a writer with a specific biography, with elements such as the appropriate social background, class consciousness, and, preferably, revolutionary activity, could enter the canon of Socialist Realism. The writer's biography was a model for a positive, doctrinally appropriate hero. The Socialist Realism classic Nikolai Ostrovsky is one of the most striking examples of a writer with such

a biography: the biographical narratives of the author and Pavel Korchagin, the hero of his autobiographical novel 'How the Steel Was Tempered' (*Kak zakalialas' stal'*, 1932–1934), are almost the same, both are sacrificed to the cause of communism. These overlaps in biographical narratives contributed to Pavel Korchagin 'becoming a "fact of life", which is significantly greater than a fact of literature' (Dobrenko 2011: 105).

An example of a straightforward political use in Lithuanian literature is the biography of Julius Janonis (1896–1917). After the Soviet occupation in 1940, the talented young poet was made a precursor of Socialist Realism in Lithuania, as his work and biography probably best fitted the ideal of revolutionary culture. Coming from a poor family, a member of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' (Bolshevik) Party, imprisoned for his revolutionary activities, suffering from consumption, and committing suicide at 21, Janonis was one of the first Lithuanian poets-urbanists, and an ideal candidate to become a Lithuanian revolutionary hero and martyr, a combination of Maxim Gorky and Nikolai Ostrovsky. This image of the poet as a victim of an exploitative system, as his sacrifice to the ideals of the revolution, was definitively reinforced by the film *Julius Janonis* (1959, directed by Balys Bratkauskas and Vytautas Dabašinskas), in which selected biographical facts serve as a frame for mythologising, which is one of the characteristics of biographical films in general, although far from all of them are openly used as a tool for political canonisation.³

An undoubtedly talented poet who denounced social injustice in his poetry and journalism, Janonis did not, and could not, take part in the Sovietisation of Lithuania, as he died before the occupation. However, in current debates, he is often treated the same way as those writers who contributed directly to the Sovietisation of Lithuania through their work and actions. Some polemicists propose to remove all traces of the young poet's former canonisation from the public domain (such as the names of streets or secondary schools), just because Janonis was made a predecessor of Socialist Realism (although he was writing before the doctrine was established). The final argument for removing Janonis

3 The poetics of Janonis' work, his social activities (e.g. in a youth organisation that supported the idea of freedom for Lithuania), and the choice of his pseudonym, Vaidilos Ainis (Descendant of Vaidila; *vaidila* is a prophet in the ancient Baltic religion), undoubtedly suggest the influence of the national movement of the end of the 19th century. During the Soviet period, the poet's biography, and also the film, was constructed as a story of the renunciation of these 'erroneous' views and the choice to defend the interests of the exploited.

from the canon is this: What is aesthetically valuable about what he has written? Biography serves as a preconception for judging the value of works. It acts as an argument in the decanonisation of the author, and for revaluing and devaluing him or her as a writer.

Biography as a decisive argument for decanonisation

In independent Lithuania after 1990, the fiercest debates were, and still are, about writers who actively contributed to the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940. Writers who in the late Soviet period took the position of national bard are also part of the debate. That position was significant in periods of political dependence in Lithuania, and partly lost its importance after 1990 (Jakonytė 2005). The debate is both about a place in the canon and about public signs of memorialisation (such as monuments, plaques, the names of streets, schools, etc), and the argument of biography is central to it. However, it is used differently to writers from the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods. It is worth noting that the political context also influences the character of this debate and the use of the biographical argument; for example, the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 encourages a reconsideration of the writer's place at the beginning of the Soviet occupation, and the writer's position vis-à-vis the regime in the late Soviet period.

The status of the writers Salomėja Nėris (Salomėja Bačinskaitė-Bučienė, 1904–1945) and Petras Cvirka (1909–1947) has been the most questioned, not only because they belonged to the centre of the canon of Soviet-era Lithuanian literature and partly the school canon,⁴ but also because signs of their canonisation still mark public spaces in Lithuania. The main argument for the removal of these signs is precisely biographical, as both writers were part of the delegation that in 1940 travelled to Moscow to 'bring Stalin's sun' to Lithuania, i.e. they were part of the so-called People's Seimas delegation that travelled to the Seventh Session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, which

4 For more on the dynamics of the canonisation of both writers in post-Soviet Lithuania, see Kučinskienė, Šeina, Vasiliauskas 2024. The authors also discuss briefly the history of the construction of their biographies.

ratified Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union on 3 August. These and some other facts⁵ allow us to treat the writers not only as artists but also as Soviet political figures whose memory signs should have no place in the public space. Vilnius municipality, despite opposition from some of the public, especially artists and cultural historians,⁶ removed the monument to Cvirka on 21 November 2021. Some politicians, historians and school alumni are calling for a debate about changing the name of the Salomėja Nėris Gymnasium, and municipalities have been taking the initiative to change the names of streets named after Cvirka and Nėris.

What about their literary work? Is it possible to separate the author from his or her oeuvre, the political figure from the writer? In the case of works that belong to the canon of Socialist Realism, the answer is no, it is hardly possible. In the cultural memory, poems and prose writing function not only as literary texts but also as personal actions that contributed to the legitimisation and glorification of the Soviet regime in Lithuania. For example, Nėris wrote *Poema apie Staliną* (A Poem about Stalin, 1940) at the beginning of the occupation, and read excerpts from it at the session of the Supreme Soviet when Lithuania was officially incorporated into the USSR, thus giving it a performative function (Satkauskytė 2022: 947–949). Cvirka revised the ending of *Žemė maitintoja* (Earth the Nourisher, 1935) so that it came closer to the *master plot* of Socialist Realism; his war and postwar short story collections *Ažuolo šaknys* (Oak Roots, 1945) and *Brolybės sėkla* (The Seed of Brotherhood, 1947), ritualistically echo topics typical of Socialist Realism (friendship between nations, with the apparent supremacy of Russia, the glorification of the Soviet soldier-liberator, etc).

Those two cases show that literary works can become biographical facts and political clues. Still, their cultural interpretations may intervene differently in biographical narratives, and form different positions in the contemporary Lithuanian literary canon.

5 For example, Cvirka's denunciation of the writer Kazys Jakubėnas to the KGB. However, thanks to the debate on removing the statue of Cvirka from the centre of Vilnius, some doubts concerning his role in the case of Jakubėnas have emerged (Pocevičius 2021).

6 I will mention a few counter-arguments to the removal of the Cvirka monument: the monument by the sculptor Juozas Mikėnas (1959) is a classic of Socialist Realism, and should be preserved as an example of the style; it was the first monument to a Lithuanian writer in Soviet Lithuania; it is unclear how the city will use the public space after its removal; and we can give new meanings through various artistic actions.

In the case of Nėris, the narrative of justification dominates, based on both the motif of repentance in her wartime poems and the censorship history of the collection *Prie didelio kelio* (By the Great Road, 1944), re-edited and published under the title *Lakštingala negali nečiulbėti* (A Nightingale Cannot but Sing) in 1945, and published in its original version only in 1994.

We are facing the paradoxical case of a literary text becoming the basis for biographical myth-making. Despite the debates in the public sphere about how to assess Nėris' relationship with communist ideas in the interwar period, and her actions during the Soviet occupation, the myth of the misguided but repentantly brilliant poet, *la poèteesse maudite* (Kvietkauskas 2014), has been and still is a very persistent one. The biographical legend of the so-called Black Notebook reinforces the myth. The Black Notebook is supposed to be the poet's diary, which she wrote during the Second World War, and in which she described what was happening in Lithuania at the beginning of the first Soviet occupation. Before her death, Nėris repented, confessed, and presumably handed the diary over to the priest who heard her confession, Juozas Gustas. According to this biographical legend, the diary should be deposited in the archives of Oxford University Library (Aleksna 1997: 695–696; Daujotytė, Janaudytė–Vyšniauskienė 2022).⁷

Nėris belongs to the Lithuanian literary canon, although she is no longer its central figure. In the public sphere, there are doubts about the value of her work, including her neo-Romantic poetry. The poet remains in sentimental and academic canons and on high school curricula.⁸

Conversely, a discourse of condemnation is dominant in Cvirka's case, and it also influences the evaluation of his work. The writer remains only on the periphery of the academic canon as a talented storyteller, a creator of social prose, and an author of sensitive prose for children.⁹

Both Nėris and Cvirka wrote most of their work before the Soviet occupation. However, the writers' positions during the Soviet occupation influenced their

7 The diary has not yet been found, which only reinforces its mythical function in Nėris' literary biography.

8 'The sentimental canon, then, is formed largely on custom: it favours books that comfort over books that challenge, books that reinforce the status quo over books that attempt to change it; it renders all books safe by their very inclusion therein' (Stevenson 1997: 116)

9 For more on the dynamics of both authors in the school literary canon, as well as the role of biography in shaping canonical positions, see Kučinskienė, Šeina, Vasiliauskas 2024.

evaluation and placement in the canon of Lithuanian literature, although the links between the work and the biography are not straightforward. In the case of Nėris, the biography and the work tend to be separated by academic and literary agents, as well as readers, and the ‘mistakes’ of her life barely affect her canonical position as a ‘pure lyricist’. In the case of Cvirka, on the contrary, the biography, including the pre-occupation part of it,¹⁰ *a priori* becomes an argument for devaluing the totality of his work, even though there are some very authoritative defenders of his prewar prose, such as Tomas Venclova and Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, who consider him a classic of Lithuanian literature (Venclova 2019).

Biographies of Soviet writers of the post-Stalin period usually no longer contain striking events that would be clues for the case for decanonisation, as public cultural activity was only possible in general by displaying loyalty to the system in one way or another. Communist Party membership or holding leading positions in creative unions are only additional arguments for reconsidering the value of works localised in the Soviet era and the writer’s place in the contemporary literary canon. The general cultural position is more important, as evidence of the relationship with the political regime. Literary texts also function as expressions of this position, and can today be interpreted as biographical acts.

Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930–2011) and his position in the late Soviet era, the place of his work in the literary canon, have been at the centre of heated debates almost throughout the last three decades in Lithuania. During the Soviet era, Marcinkevičius’ dramas and poetry awakened the national consciousness, although the writer did not transgress the boundaries allowed by the Soviet system. Later, the writer was one of the most active figures in the Sąjūdis political organisation, founded in 1988, which led Lithuania to independence. The writer earned a reputation as a national bard and the conscience of the nation among the public, and was considered to be a person belonging to a higher level of culture, for whom a conventional biography was not necessary (Kmita 2018: 84). Nevertheless, the argument of the biography keeps coming up in these debates.

10 Cvirka was one of the leaders of the left-wing avant-garde movement, and was involved in a plagiarism scandal: in 1932 he published a translated short story by a Romanian Jewish writer under a pseudonym (Tamošaitis 2010: 54–55).

The biographical arguments used in the debate on Marcinkevičius' relationship with the Soviet system are of several kinds. The first one would be discrediting biographical facts. The so-called Marcinkevičius case began with the disclosure of such a fact: on 6 June 1991, on the Lithuanian television programme 'Krantas', the poet Venclova and the political analyst Aleksandras Štromas accused Marcinkevičius of having written the novel *Pušis, kuri juokėsi* (The Pine Tree that Laughed, 1961) for the KGB. The KGB's version of the order is not confirmed: according to Marcinkevičius himself (Marcinkevičius 2018: 487, 498) and other sources, functionaries of the Communist Party Central Committee, and not directly the KGB, offered him access to material found during searches of young artists' homes. Marcinkevičius used this material to write the novel, and to portray young artists as decadents. Still, neither the KGB nor the Central Committee asked the writer directly to create it. Despite these inaccuracies, the book *Pušis, kuri juokėsi* and the story of its writing became an argument for trying to move Marcinkevičius from the rank of a national bard to that of a Soviet writer. Vytautas Toleikis stated that Justinas Marcinkevičius was the most outstanding Soviet-Lithuanian poet when in 2023 he questioned whether such a poet needs a monument in the centre of Vilnius (Toleikis 2023). But just like Nėris, Marcinkevičius remains at the centre of the sentimental canon.

The often-remembered and constantly reinterpreted story of the manuscript of Dalia Grinkevičiūtė's (1927–1987) memories of a Soviet labour camp could be this kind of argument. Grinkevičiūtė visited Marcinkevičius in 1987 to hand over the manuscript of her memoirs, hoping for help in publishing it, but having read the manuscript, the poet returned it to the author. However, in 1988, as Perestroika was belatedly gaining momentum in Lithuania, Marcinkevičius published an article on Grinkevičiūtė's memoirs in the cultural weekly *Literatūra ir menas* entitled 'Reabilituota 1970' (Rehabilitated in 1970). Marcinkevičius' apologists tend to gloss over this fact, which does not fit the mythical biographical narrative of the nation's conscience (Bernotienė 2023: 148–149).

The second group of biographical arguments is the recurrent disclosure of loyalty to the system, including involvement in Soviet institutions, and the enjoyment of the privileges of that loyalty. Such things as trips abroad, 'a luxurious apartment, generous honoraria' (Toleikis 2023) were not exceptional facts of Marcinkevičius' life; many artists loyal to the system, including those who considered themselves semi-nonconformists, shared similar, albeit lesser,

privileges. Marcinkevičius was more deeply involved in the network of Soviet institutions than many of his counterparts: in 1957, at the age of 27, he joined the Communist Party, served as deputy chairman of the Lithuanian Writers' Union, was a candidate for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Lithuanian SSR and a deputy to the LSSR Supreme Soviet, and was awarded numerous awards by the Soviet authorities, including the title of People's Poet of the Lithuanian SSR. All these facts are known and publicly available, but in independent Lithuania they are often suppressed as inappropriate to the biography of Marcinkevičius as a national bard. A typical example of an openly mythologising biography is Valentinas Sventickas' book *Apie Justiną Marcinkevičių* (On Justinas Marcinkevičius, 2011), published shortly after the poet's death. Sventickas writes about Marcinkevičius as a saint and martyr of Lithuanian culture. The book's structure and iconographic material make us recall the original meaning of the word 'canonisation': at the beginning, there is a photograph of the poet's funeral, and almost at the very end, relics of the poet (his books, his writing desk). The revision of Marcinkevičius' place in the canon is part of the more general process of desovietisation, but the uncritical biographical narrative also strengthens efforts to decanonise the writer.

The third type of argument, and perhaps the most common, is the reconstruction of the biography and cultural attitudes from Marcinkevičius' work. Cases such as topics typical of the Soviet discourse in general, and Socialist Realism in particular, e.g. the condemnation of the Catholic Church in the long poem *Kraujas ir pelenai* (Blood and Ashes, 1960), and a poem about Lenin written during the years of Perestroika,¹¹ are relatively trivial examples of Marcinkevičius' engagement with the system and his excessive gestures of loyalty to it. As with the second type of argument, those who write about Marcinkevičius either omit these facts, or, on the contrary, include them in the writer's reception 'with the deconstructive pathos that is the inverse side of heroisation' (Kmita 2012: 97).

To summarise, in these deconstructive interpretations, Marcinkevičius' work becomes an expression of a hybrid, liminal identity (Subačius 2010). The national pathos of his poetry and dramas is interpreted as an expression of Soviet content in a national form (Putinaitė 2019). The new interpretations also

11 For example, on 22 April 1987, Marcinkevičius published a poem celebrating Lenin's birthday in *Tiesa*, the leading daily newspaper of the Lithuanian Communist Party.

imply a reinterpretation of the writer's personality: the national bard becomes a conformist, an embodiment of a colonised consciousness.

Some use this type of argument to interpret a work of art as expressing the author's deliberate intention to undermine the nation's interests. This is the case of the discussion that erupted at the end of 2023 about the monument to Marcinkevičius' dramatic trilogy in the centre of Vilnius.¹² Toleikis, who opened the heated debate, clearly declared the distinction between the author and his works: 'A democratic, simple, warm person, who does not divide his readers by education or place of residence' (Toleikis 2023). The same point is echoed at least several times in the article 'Culture Wars and Ceasefire: The Monument to Justinas Marcinkevičius' by the writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, who passionately joined the discussion: 'I have expressed my personal opinion, a respectful one, by the way, directed not at the personality, but at what the personality has left to history and the reader's will and perception, *the works themselves*' (Sabaliauskaitė 2023, italics in the original). Mentioning famous examples such as Caravaggio, Bernini and Dostoevsky, the writer stresses that the effect of the author's morality on the value of the work is a 'problematic question', but soon becomes confused and derives writers' morality from his work. Sabaliauskaitė directly calls Marcinkevičius' dramatic trilogy a work of lies and propaganda (Želnienė, Jokūbaitis 2023; Sabaliauskaitė 2023). Although she stresses that she is talking about the work, she attributes the intention of lying and slander to the author, treating it as a deliberate choice on the writer's part, and turning the work into biographical clues.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, the interaction between a writer's work and their biography is multi-directional and, as can be seen from the examples of Lithuanian literature discussed above, influences the writer's place in the canon in various ways. A 'proper' biography can become an essential or complementary element in the canonisation of a writer. At the same time, a radical change in the political

12 The idea for a monument to the poet came from the writer's family, and was supported by the Lithuanian Writers' Union.

situation can lead to a reinterpretation of the biography, which can be an impetus for the reevaluation of the work and the decanonisation of the writer, as in the case of Cvirka. The work can also become a means for reconstructing a biography, as in the case of Nėris.

Texts glorifying the Soviet regime can function as evidence of collaboration ('A Poem about Stalin' by Nėris), and excessive gestures of loyalty to such a system in the late Soviet period can indicate a high degree of engagement with the system (in the case of Marcinkevičius). However, even works that glorify the regime cannot always be taken as evidence of collaboration. It depends on the conditions under which the work was written (by free will or by force) and what function it fulfils (performative, or just a formal affirmation of loyalty, without which legal cultural activity was almost impossible in Soviet times). It is not always possible to reconstruct these conditions with precision, and to define the text's functions rigorously, just as it is not always possible to distinguish between the author, his public activity and his work. Therefore, the relationship between the author's work and his biography is the subject of heated public debate.

The constant debate on the role of writers in the sovietisation of Lithuania, their actions and attitudes, and their place in the canon of national literature, testify to the fact that the Soviet era in Lithuania is still a place of so-called hot memory.¹³ As I mentioned, the Russian war against Ukraine, which began in 2022, has triggered the memory of the Soviet occupation, and is sparking new wars of memory. The biographies of writers are also becoming the objects of these wars. While writing this article, the Desovietisation Commission, which evaluates public signs and symbols left over from the Soviet era, decided that the streets named after Salomėja Nėris in Lithuania promote the totalitarian regime. Formally speaking, the Commission agreed on a biographical argument, i.e. a document entitled 'A Synopsis of the Political Biography of S. Nėris 1940–1945 — historical archival certificate' (Vilkelytė 2024).

The fierce emotional involvement of the participants characterises the discussion. Still, those who evaluate the biography and the writer's work, and their relationship with each other, take essentially similar positions of condemnation or justification as in the previous debates discussed in this article. The dominant tendency is to separate the writer's biography from her work at

13 For types of so-called hot and cold memory, see Charles S. Maier 2002.

the beginning of the Soviet occupation and her work as a neo-Romantic poet. This separation reaffirms Nėris' place in the canon of Lithuanian literature, with her neo-Romantic lyrics and the poetry of the Second World War. However, some radical criticism of this approach appeared in the discussion. 'Even if we were able to make a strict distinction between Nėris the poet and Nėris the communist, it would only mean a failure to recognise her integrity as a person,' says Laurynas Peluritis. Nevertheless, he adds that he has no doubt about the poet's remaining in the literary canon (Peluritis 2024).

In the West, the debate on writers' political acts (anti-Semitic statements, active support for Nazi or other totalitarian regimes, sexual crimes) is also quite active, and provokes similar questions: whether it is possible to distinguish between the author's morality and the work's 'morality', to what extent the separation or non-separation of the two influence the writer's place in the canon, and why resistance to some canonisation practices arises (e.g. questioning the Nobel Prize awarded to Peter Handke, whose attitude towards Balkan wars has been ambiguous). In this debate, the context of historical memory intertwines with the current trend of *cancel culture*. The latter is also at work in Lithuania, but the memory of the Soviet era is still the most heated factor in the debate.

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