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Editor of this issue: Violeta Kelertas

Book review:

Ričardas Gavelis. Vilnius Poker. Translated by Elizabeth Novickas. Rochester, NY: Open Letter Press, University of Rochester Press, 2009, 485 pages.

"*Sometimes life's time rushes along too fast.*" – Vytautas Vargalys.

Seven years ago I learned of the death of Ričardas Gavelis, an author I'd always considered young. After trekking all the way across Chicago for an afternoon lecture, I decided to blow off the afternoon at a cafe with a colleague who was preparing to go to the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Lithuania was the 2002 featured country. A large delegation of writers was going, she told me, and then added something I couldn't quite hear over the roar of traffic. It sounded like "too bad Ričardas Gavelis won't be there." I repeated the phrase back, adding a question mark. "I said, he's dead," she answered. The news stopped me in my tracks.

Gavelis caused a sensation in Lithuania in 1989, when his novel *Vilnius Poker* appeared. Sąjūdis was gaining momentum, the USSR was changing in ways that few had predicted, and here was a book unlike anything Lithuanian readers had seen before. Written for the drawer in the 1980s, the novel tells of an attempt to reconcile with public and private pasts and a struggle to survive in a soul-killing system that denies history. Portraying a group of acquaintances and colleagues whose lives intersect in Vilnius, the novel is a murder mystery: the death of a young woman named Lolita is narrated by four unreliable narrators whose contradictory versions of events are replete with sex, torture, and a nightmarish Vilnius that itself becomes a character in the novel. But Gavelis's urban grunge and his portrayal of the bleakness and absurdity of Soviet life provide the perfect backdrop for what, at times, is a curiously hilarious novel.

The constellation of characters the novel follows are loosely linked to one another, but all are connected by Vytautas Vargalys, the narrator of the first section called "Them," that makes up over half the novel. His name, reminiscent of Lithuanian vargas (fatigue, suffering) is fitting for one who has seen too much in one lifetime. We learn early in his account that he is a dissident of sorts, and that he has spent time in the gulag, but we never learn why. "They" is a meditation on *Them* – on who *They* are, where *They* come from, and how *They* manage to get so powerful. *They* remain as ambiguous as Vilnius itself. *They* are the occupying forces, those corrupted by the system.

Vargalys works at the State Library and has access to special collections of books deemed unsuitable for Soviet consumption: "Hundreds of thousands of books are buried there. God knows I shuddered in horror when I learned what portion of the world is hidden from us. Probably the best, the most important part." He uses this access to research Them, searching for traces throughout history, until his findings become too numerous, and he changes his focus to periods without *Them*. But in asking who *They* are, Vargalys must of course ask who *We* are. Who is this nation that cannot seem to get back on its feet? *Vilnius Poker* has no comforting words for those seeking solace in cultural identity. It calls Lithuania a headless nation, and suggests that perhaps the Lithuanians got what they deserved: "The evil powers deceived us and stole our brains. And it's very easy to enslave a brainless country. . ."

The most likeable character in *Vilnius Poker* is Martynas Poška, a self-described collector of destinies, grieving clown of Vilnius, and narrator of the second part of the novel. He tells the reader about his life-long project called "the mlog" in which he documents the reality around him, mostly by spying on his colleagues who work together with him in the library. His is a fragmented and wandering text, offering up portraits such as that of a young boy, a zealous pupil of Marxism, who sculpts Stalin busts out of bread during lunch hour (using real hair for the moustache), offering up theories of what it means to be Lithuanian ("Only a Lithuanian is qualified to write the opus 'What is the Ass of the Universe'"), and describing a malady he calls Vilnius Syndrome. With each narrator, the sections grow shorter, and our certainty of what has happened begins to wane. The book closes with "Vox Canina," narrated by a stray dog, a shadow of the legendary iron wolf of Vilnius and reincarnated citizen of a city where the only sane view is paranoid. Uncertainty reigns in Gavelis's Vilnius, and the novel challenges its reader with a simple question: who's crazy now?

I have a friend who began reading this novel somewhat grudgingly, out of a sense of obligation. He was surprised when he couldn't put it down. The book was brilliant and brutal, but he wondered if a reader with no ties to Eastern Europe would get it. It's a fair question. I hope that the book makes it into enough random hands to answer it.

By the time I read *Vilnius Poker* for the first time in 1998, the excitement over it had died down somewhat. From the short e-mail correspondence we had, I understood that Gavelis was weary from numerous and unfulfilled promises to translate

his book. For years proposals had languished on the desks of university press editors, and the prospect of its ever appearing in English seemed slim. Against all odds, Elizabeth Novickas has succeeded in bringing this dark, funny, and important book to an English reading audience.

The best thing one can say about a translation is that it doesn't read like one, and this is certainly true of Novickas's rendition. Hers was no easy task. To begin with, Gavelis's language is dense, infused with literary allusion, and peppered with Russian obscenities. Add to this the many neologisms like "mlog" and "kanuk" (one corrupted by totalitarianism) that Gavelis's narrators need to describe their weird and nightmarish world. Finally, there is his love of rhyme and sound play to contend with. All this results in a tall order for a translator, and Novickas rises to all these challenges, finding creative yet elegant solutions. She has succeeded in paring her text down to its essential kernel, losing none of Gavelis in the process. Finally, to her credit, Novickas has resisted the temptation to footnote every cultural reference, obscure historical fact, pun or Slavic curse and trusts her readers to experience the world of Vilnius Poker from their own perspectives and in their own ways.

A labor of love if there ever was one, Novickas's translation weighs in at a hefty four hundred and eighty-five crisp and readable pages. It's a fitting monument to a writer who left us too soon.

Julija Šukys