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The Role of Romanticism and Transcendental Philosophy in Shaping Lithuanian Environmental Thought

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Abstract

This article analyzes the evolution of environmental thought in Lithuania from the collision between Enlightenment and Romanticism to the first half of the 20th century, outlining a shift in the dominant conceptual approach to Nature. It shows how a significant part of the philosophical field gradually shifted from Cartesian dualism to Romantic attempts at moving towards monism, which led to the emergence of early ecological consciousness. By focusing on key Lithuanian figures in environmental thought—philosophers Vydūnas (real name: Vilhelmas Storosta, 1868–1953) and Vincas Vyčinas (1918–1996), along with the renowned biologist Tadas Ivanauskas (1882–1970)—the study examines how Lithuanians engaged with competing visions of humanity's relationship with nature. The analysis begins with Lithuania's encounter with the Cartesian version of rationalist Enlightenment, which is explored through the influence of René Descartes. It is shown that the Cartesian approach manifested through the devaluation of symbolic reasoning and wilderness in favor of controlled, utilitarian landscapes. The article then highlights the Romantic reaction to this approach, which re-enchanted nature through emotional and mystical connections, as seen in the rehabilitation of the Lithuanian "bear-boy" myth and in the transcendentalist-inspired conservation efforts of Ivanauskas. Another important part of this article is devoted to the study of the works of the first Lithuanian environmental

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philosophers—Vydūnas and Vyčinas. It is shown that Vydūnas' environmental thought and his Romantic vision of nature laid the first basis for biocentric ethics in Lithuania. Meanwhile, Vyčinas' ecocentric philosophy is analyzed as an attempt to advance this tradition to a stricter ecocentric perspective, positing nature as sacred and intrinsically valuable. Methodologically, the article combines the history of ideas and hermeneutics, situating Lithuanian thought within broader European and transcontinental dialogues, including Rousseau's idealism and American transcendentalism. The study argues that Lithuanian environmental philosophy developed by combining a critique of Enlightenment instrumentalism, a Romantic re-enchantment of nature, and an ethical turn toward interspecies responsibility.

Keywords

environmental philosophy, Romanticism, Enlightenment, Lithuanian philosophy, nature-culture dualism

Introduction

In this article, I will examine the evolution of environmental thought in Lithuania, from the clash between Enlightened rationalism and Romanticism to the emergence of Romantic ecological philosophy in 20th-century Lithuania. This timeframe shows a significant shift in the philosophical approach to nature, from Cartesian dualism to Romantic attempts at moving towards monist ontology, and eventually to early ecological consciousness. Focusing on major Lithuanian environmental thinkers, such as Vydūnas (1868–1953), Vincas Vyčinas (1918–1996), and Tadas Ivanauskas (1882–1970), I will examine how Lithuanian thinkers situated themselves in the competing visions of humanity's relationship with nature: moving away from a rationally managed nature, which was merely a resource, towards a spiritual entity to be revered or an ecological partner demanding ethical consideration. The analysis will begin with Lithuania's encounter with Enlightenment thought, from where it will progress to analyzing how Romanticism reshaped environmental perceptions, emphasizing emotional connection to the landscape while also laying the groundwork for later biocentric ethics. A significant part of this study will be devoted to analyzing the pioneering contributions of Lithuanian philosopher Vydūnas (real name: Vilhelmas Storosta), whose synthesis of Romantic nature worship, Eastern metaphysics, and a progressive scientific outlook produced a unique environmental approach. I will also trace the relationship between the practical conservation work of Ivanauskas and the Romantic philosophy of that time. Finally, I will show how

the metaphysical ecophilosophy of Vyčinas pushed Lithuanian ecosophy to new heights and how it is intertwined with the Lithuanian environmental tradition. The basic idea of all these developments is to reveal the transformations and influences of Romantic philosophy on Lithuanian environmental thought.

Methodologically, the article combines methods of the history of ideas and hermeneutics with textual analysis, drawing on primary sources ranging from philosophical treatises to memoirs. It employs a comparative framework to situate Lithuanian thought within broader European and transcontinental dialogues.

The article argues that Lithuanian environmental thought developed in three major directions: a critique of instrumental rationality inherited but modified from the Enlightenment; a Romantic re-enchantment of nature that resisted industrial modernity while sometimes selectively embracing scientific progress; and an ethical turn toward interspecies responsibility that anticipated later ecological movements. Ultimately, in this article, I would like to map the conceptual transition from anthropocentric stewardship to the beginning of ecological interconnectedness in Lithuanian thought.

Enlightenment and Its Detachment From Nature as the Point of Romanticist Critique

As the famous French philosopher Bruno Latour has noted, all versions of modern philosophy are based on artificial detachments between the mind and the body, as well as between nature and culture. As Latour himself has said:

> "The moderns think they have succeeded in such an expansion only because they have carefully separated Nature and Society (and bracketed God), whereas they have succeeded only because they have mixed together much greater masses of humans and nonhumans, without bracketing anything and without ruling out any combination!" (Latour, 1993, p. 41)

The modern clear-cut detachment between body and mind is a huge challenge for symbolic reasoning. Symbolic reasoning in this article is understood as a mode of thought that prioritizes symbols and their complexes, where a symbol is understood as a "sign that signifies itself and something else" (Mažeikis, 1998, p. 18). It is important to keep in mind that, unlike a metaphor, it also "aspires to replace the thing itself or at least to be equated with it" (Mažeikis, 1998, p. 20). In other words, symbols have a dual reality: not only does the material aspect of the symbol exist,

but its signifying aspect also claims to be part of reality. This means that in symbolic reasoning, the signified cannot be separated from the signifier, nor can the body really be fully separated from the mind.

Within this framework of symbolic thinking, objects are not strictly identical to themselves; they are both themselves and something else. Strictly speaking, a symbol does not merely point to but rather manifests another thing through itself. Moreover, a symbol is dynamic: it can change its essence. Symbolic thinking, for example, allows wine to become blood, lead to turn into gold, and an animal to be seen as God. Within this mode of thought, a tattoo on the chest may protect against bullets, and two crossed wooden planks can make crowds of people kneel. In all these cases, through the materiality of the symbol, another, alternative reality is revealed. This way of thinking ontologically tends toward monism. Due to the very nature of the symbol, symbolic reasoning thrives on preserving ambiguities. Contradictions in this mode of thought are not considered fully contradictory, just as in Hegelian dialectics different modes of Spirit do not contradict each other, but rather, through their opposition, allow a bigger whole to manifest itself (Hegel, 1977, p. 16). According to Gintautas Mažeikis, this type of thinking dominated the Renaissance. During this period, language and thought were also characterized by such allegorical ways of perceiving the world (Mažeikis, 1998, p. 19). If we keep in mind the role of symbolic reasoning in the Renaissance, it is no wonder that prior to the emergence of modern philosophy, interactions with natural environments, such as hunting, also had their own important symbolic aspects.

According to historian Toma Zarankaitė-Margienė, during the 15th–16th centuries, hunting was valued "for its dramatic nature and the ability to provide intense sensations" (Zarankaitė-Margienė, 2018, p. 230), while in the meantime, it required "a robust physical constitution of the hunter and the determination to endure unexpected trials" (Zarankaitė-Margienė, 2018, p. 230). During these hunts, observation platforms were often set up, from which the ladies of the court and children would observe the entire hunting process. The hunt itself was a very physical activity: the hunter risked his life and health to overcome a powerful animal. At the time, the hunts usually employed spears; thus, physical strength was a necessity. The hunt itself, to an extent, was a demonstration of strength and agility, while the confrontation with the animal also carried a symbolic function: it was often considered "a reinforcement of a blood pact" (Zarankaitė-Margienė, 2018, p. 202). The ruler, armed with a spear, would fight alongside his entourage against an aurochs, finding himself

in a life-or-death encounter. Here, by overcoming this formidable beast of the forest, he would symbolically affirm his own right to rule the forest domain. By overcoming the living symbol of the forest's power, the ruler himself would become it.

During the reign of John Casimir II Vasa, the rapid spread of the Cartesian stream of rationalist modern philosophy across Europe inevitably reached the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The leading figure of this philosophical branch was the famous French philosopher René Descartes, who is well-known for his dualistic ontology, in which human existence is equated to the mind, and the mind itself to cold, emotionless logical reasoning. By dismantling the monistic worldview, Cartesian thought also fought against symbolic reasoning, since, as it was shown, symbolic reasoning depends on the conjuncture between body and sign. Cartesian philosophy, meanwhile, dismissed bodily feelings and emotions as mere affects—disturbances that, according to him, usually led the mind astray from truth. He also separated physicality (and the body in general), which was crucial in activities like hunting, from the human essence (his *res cogitans*, the thinking substance) and, in the process, declared the body a distinct substance (*res extensa*). By separating the mind from the body and reserving the mind for humans and God only, Descartes created an unbridgeable divide between people and the natural world, including animals and plants (Descartes, 1973, pp. 115–116; 311). The Cartesian branch of the rationalist philosophical project made a significant shift in our relationship with the natural world, turning Nature into a distinct Other, a separate substance, alien to humanity. The Cartesian point of view also reduced the role of animals to mere machines, proclaiming them to be utterly inferior to the grandeur of the human soul. Meanwhile, the ideal environment for this soul was far removed from the adrenaline-fueled chaos of the hunt in the forest. Instead, the ideal environment for Descartes was a contemplative and quiet corner of the palace. He wrote: "Fortunately I had also no cares or passions to trouble me, I remained the whole day shut up alone in a stove-heated room, where I had complete leisure to occupy myself with my own thoughts" (Descartes, 1973, p. 87). Much of Europe's elite followed suit, either dismissing hunting as a crude, bodily pleasure or radically altering its content and adhering to a strictly consumerist interpretation, with far less symbolic significance than it previously had.

In 1649, Descartes—already a renowned scholar—was invited to the court of Queen Christina of Sweden (a second cousin of John Casimir II Vasa), and from there his philosophy easily spread to Lithuania. Around the same time, a bear-boy

tale began to spread across Europe, depicting Lithuania as a wild, forested land where people were so primitive that bears allegedly raised human children. The portrayal of Lithuania was not really a new thing in the West: even the crusaders of the Teutonic Order marked Lithuanian territories as the wilderness—*die Wildnis* (Meehan, 2020, p. 93). However, this specific legend brought this "cultured" vs. "barbaric" and East vs. West distinction to a new level, and I consider it a good illustration of the dominant philosophical approach. European travelers, particularly the compatriots of Descartes, eagerly recorded these bear-boy tales as factual. One of the earliest accounts came from French traveler Antoine de Gramont in 1663, who claimed to have seen, during a visit to John Casimir's residence, "a boy, who was discovered by peasants near Vilnius, among 'five or six bear cubs' nursing from 'the mother bear', which was exhibited in the palace garden as part of the entertainment program" (Benzaquén, 2006, p. 28). Decades later, another Frenchman—a Jesuit missionary, Philippe Avril—repeated similar claims. He states:

> "There is an account of a child raised by a bear, discovered among a pack of bears during the reign of the late Queen of Poland, Louise Marie. I was told such occurrences still sometimes happen—children are sometimes found in the dens of these animals, living alongside bear cubs, even after being abducted and left at the mercy of the beasts for days. Later, with much fanfare, I was shown the Academy where bears are dressed up before being paraded through European towns, as is often done." (Avril, 1692, p. 283)

These tales helped to cement the myth of not-really-human Lithuanians in the European imagination, a myth about Lithuanians who are often raised by bears and are themselves very animal-like. Such an interpretation of the legend was further popularized by John Casimir's personal physician, Bernard Connor, who wrote:

> "There is one forest more than a hundred miles long, in which the people are very wild and uneducated (...). I was assured by the Duke (and it is believed throughout the kingdom anyway) that there are many children in these woods who have been raised by bears. At the time of my visit one of these was kept in a monastery (...) he was at that time about ten years old (judging by his appearance and features alone), he was of a terrible countenance, and had neither mind nor speech: he walked on all fours, and had nothing human except for the human structure (...) after being taught for a long time he managed to stand upright leaning against the wall, being held in the same way as dogs are taught to beg, and little by little accustomed to eating at the table, after a considerable time he became calmer and began to express his

> consciousness with an inhuman tone. (...) I was assured of the truth of that event by the King himself, by several officials and other great men of that kingdom, and besides, it is a common and undisputed opinion that in those countries children are often nursed and brought up by bears." (Connor, 1698, pp. 342–343)

The bear-boy quickly became a defining symbol of Lithuanian backwardness—it represented an intimate, primal bond between humans and nature that horrified the enlightened and rational (in the Cartesian sense) Europe. This relationship clashed with the Cartesian ideal of rational man and his detachment from everything natural and bodily, rendering Lithuanians who maintained their ties to the forest as less than fully human. To "become civilized", they had to cut off their connection with the wild. A rupture in tradition was necessary, and it came.

Within a century, the tale of the Lithuanian bear-boy—which became a metaphor for the uncivilized Lithuanian—was already being taught to locals in philosophy classes at Vilnius University. These classes employed a textbook, *On Logic* (*De re logica*), written by Portuguese philosopher Luís António Verney, in which the bear-boy story was used to argue against innate ideas (Plečkaitis, 1989, p. 14; Verney, 1751, p. 60). This textbook even saw a reprint in Vilnius in 1764. A few decades later, as the legend spread, a new ideal of Nature emerged in Lithuanian academia: the Enlightenment vision of the Natural, epitomized by Jan Śniadecki, rector of Vilnius University (1807–1815). Condemning the Romantic approach to nature, he wrote:

> "Romanticism treats society as a rabble clinging to 16th-century superstitions and peasant nonsense... It glorifies outdated customs, yearning for a primitive, untamed nature! Witchcraft and ghosts are not nature but the fruits of ignorance... Not one of our poets would prefer wandering through thorns and swamps over strolling in Puławy Park." (Sniadeckis, 2007, pp. 102–104)

Śniadecki's own ideal was Puławy Park: nature transformed by human reason and stripped of any discomfort, such as thorns, weeds, and marshes. For him, only rationally reconstructed nature held value, much like the bear-boy, who could only "become human" through learning Verney's logic. Untouched wilderness was proclaimed to be impractical, ugly, and worthless. True nature, like true art, required "geometric precision and the symmetry of Versailles" (Kubilius, 1986, p. 13).

This philosophical mindset gave rise to scientific forestry. In 1803, Russia's first forestry school opened in St. Petersburg; by 1811, it became an institute. Warsaw

opened a special forester school in 1812, and Vilnius University established an agronomy institute in 1823. Forests began to be managed methodically: animals were fed, saplings were planted, and hunting was regulated by scientific supervision. "Useful trees" were prioritized over "useless" ones, and foresters became educated professionals who wore uniforms, formed societies, and published specialized journals. Royal forests were divided into quadrants, crisscrossed with clearings for surveillance. As Michel Foucault observed in *Discipline and Punish*, Enlightenment institutions replaced sporadic violence with constant regulation (Foucault, 1995, p. 140). The same happened to human-forest relations: flora and fauna were "disciplined" into optimal productivity. Clearings acted as panopticons, ensuring control. The wilderness became an industry. Even hunting transformed. Once a physical struggle, it became a leisurely pursuit—conducted from pavilions, with abundant alcohol and firearms. The risk and the primal contest for power vanished.

Romantic Approach to Nature as the Basis for Environmental Thought

The vision of nature described above, which emerged with Cartesian thought and reached its peak with the Enlightenment, was primarily challenged by Romanticism. Thus, I wish to briefly return to the story of the Lithuanian bear-boy, but this time from a Romantic perspective. The myth never fully "abandoned" Lithuanian territory, even though it has changed in meaning and dominant interpretation. In 1868, the bear-boy was reborn as the protagonist of Prosper Mérimée's novella *The Bear: Professor Wittembach's Manuscript*, a significant work of French Romantic literature. This novella inspired numerous adaptations, including cinematic interpretations by Konstantin Eggert (1925), Janusz Majewski (1970), and Walerian Borowczyk (1975), as well as an opera by Bronius Kutavičius titled *Lokys* (2000). All these interpretations have ensured that the bear-boy, as a cultural image, persists to this day.

Mérimée's portrayal of the adult bear-man diverges significantly from earlier depictions of this story. Notably, it lacks the repulsive author's reaction, a certain disgust evident in, for example, B. Connor's narrative. Although Mérimée's protagonist exhibits classic bear traits—such as climbing trees, having claws and teeth, and being covered in black fur—Professor Wittembach describes him as a person "ha[v-ing] much higher intelligence than, I admit, I should have expected; he loves reading" (Mérimée, 1905). This bear-person no longer represents a bear-reared human, nor is it a human who lacks something essential to its human nature, but rather

a human embodying ursine essence, ursine strength, agility, and other ursine features. Significantly, Mérimée demonstrates profound fascination rather than disdain for Lithuanian wilderness, envisioning it as a mythic space populated by witches, bears, lions, and mammoths: "Here the beasts all live as in a Republic" (Mérimée, 1905). His fascination with Lithuanian culture was so profound that he reportedly learned Samogitian to access the bear-boy's linguistic world (Nastopka, 1995, p. 42). Thus, through Romantic literature's mediation, the ursine child was rehabilitated as an object of philosophical and aesthetic contemplation, with Lithuanian nature undergoing a parallel revaluation.

This intellectual transformation was again spearheaded by French philosophers. In 1750, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*—which won the Dijon Academy prize—proclaimed that there is an inverse correlation between cultural advancement and moral development. To put it in his words, "Our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection" (Rousseau, 1750, p. 7). This critique found its ground in Rousseau's positive view of humanity in the State of Nature (a mythical pre-cultural time). In this state, humanity—according to him—shared qualities with other natural beings ("for men and beasts have been treated alike by nature" (Rousseau, 2004)). Rousseau's likening of humans and animals challenged the Cartesian mechanistic view of beasts as mere machines. Unlike most other French Enlightenment thinkers, who shared beliefs similar to those of Śniadecki described earlier in this article, Rousseau emerged as a counter-Enlightenment figure. He rejected the aristocratic culture that had captivated Descartes' followers and instead proposed alternative paradigms rooted in either antiquity—"ancient political thinkers forever spoke of morals and of virtue; ours speak only of commerce and of money" (Rousseau, 2004, p. 16)—or among contemporary (but as if frozen in time) peasantry (Rousseau, 2004), pagans (Rousseau, 2004, p. 24), and geographically distant "primitive" Native Americans, whom he idolized (Rousseau, 2004, p. 10). I would like to emphasize that he preferred these figures not for their intellectual or cultural achievements, but for their perceived self-sufficiency, authenticity, and the immediate harmony between their desires and their capacities—things that he thought modern society corrupts in human beings by fostering artificial needs, vanity, and dependence on the opinions of others.

Rousseau's value system consistently privileged naturalness, establishing peasant life ("being close to the origins") and unspoiled nature as universal values. Like other Romantic thinkers, Rousseau nostalgically yearned for symbolic thought's

monistic worldview while remaining incapable of overcoming modernity's epistemological dualism. Polish historian Michał Baliński gives an interesting account of Rousseau's plan to resettle in Poland to live in a forest with the villagers, which clearly illustrates this tension:

> "As is known, the renowned Jean-Jacques Rousseau, at Wielhorski's request, prepared a governmental reform proposal for Poland around 1770. While undertaking this work, he thoroughly studied our nation's history, familiarizing himself with its customs and legal system. During this period, he held an exceptionally favorable opinion of the Poles and indicated he would prefer living among them over remaining in corrupt Paris. Upon learning of this sentiment, Antoni Tyzenhauz—Treasurer of the Lithuanian Court—during his 1778 visit to the French capital, attempted to persuade the Genevan philosopher to relocate to Poland. Aware of Rousseau's preference for solitude [...], Tyzenhauz proposed to help him settle in the Białowieża Forest—undoubtedly the most magnificent wilderness in all of Europe. According to the plan presented, Tyzenhauz was to construct a manor, furnish the philosopher with all necessary amenities and services, and provide transportation, while making no demands or favors. [...] Initially, the proposal appealed to the Parisian eremite; it even appeared that the offer would be accepted. However, an unexpected incident subsequently nullified all of Tyzenhauz's efforts and persuasions. To his misfortune, a notorious adventurer, Wiarzewicz, appeared in Paris. Exploiting Rousseau's eccentric temperament, he befriended the philosopher and, unfortunately, succeeded in deceiving him. The philosopher, outraged by this betrayal of trust, became dismayed with the Poles. Abandoning his intentions to reside in the Białowieża wilderness, he instead relocated to Ermenonville, a suburb of Paris." (Baliński & Lipiński, 1846, pp. 780–781)

Essentially, when it comes to the relation to nature, Rousseau introduced Romantic philosophy through his "return to nature" imperative, which subsequent thinkers would attempt to implement literally. A good example of such implementation can be seen in the works and actions of the Transcendentalist movement (a philosophical movement in the United States that emerged in the 19th century). The movement was spearheaded by thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau, who became Rousseau's ideological successors. Thoreau's Walden experiment (1845–1847), in which this now-famous philosopher decided to move to a forest by Walden Pond to live a self-sufficient life in solitude, not depending on the constraints of society, embodied Rousseau's philosophical radical ideal of self-reliance in a natural environment. His stated purpose: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of

life [...], and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau, 2021, p. 84) clearly expresses Rousseau's values, such as essential existence beyond civilization's artificial constraints. Where Rousseau only had a theoretical ideal, Thoreau brought this Romantic return to the "wilderness" to actuality.

Thoreau's *Walden* experiment inspired another Transcendentalist—John Muir—to advocate for wilderness preservation, culminating in the establishment of the Sierra Club and the establishment of America's first national parks. The Sierra Club became the first non-governmental environmental protection organization in the world, a predecessor of Greenpeace. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the national parks are protected territories sheltering nature from anthropogenic damage—a very Rousseau-like goal. Thus, Rousseau's philosophical legacy—through the works of American Transcendentalists—helped to conceptualize (if not to invent) pristine wilderness as sacralized space, and to find it particularly in America (whose native people Rousseau viewed as existing in natural harmony). Paradoxically, the preservation of nature now required protection from civilization's primary agent: the cultural Europeans themselves, whose romantic subjectivity remained perpetually divided from their own romanticized objects of desire.

The environmental protection ideas rooted in Romantic (and especially Transcendentalist) philosophy spread across Europe during the early 20th century through the neo-Romantic cultural wave, clashing with earlier paradigms of Enlightenment (which, in turn, was based on nature regulation, optimization, and nature domination—all shaped by modern and Enlightened continental philosophy). This ideological shift manifested institutionally through the establishment of nature protection areas: Sweden's first national park (Sånfjället) was founded in 1909, followed by the Swiss National Park (1914), two Spanish national parks (1918), and Poland's Białowieża Reserve (1921). Together with the creation of national parks, Europe at that time witnessed the proliferation of American-style conservation societies and the adoption of environmental legislation reflecting Rousseau's/Transcendentalist ideals.

Lithuania participated in this transnational movement through the advocacy of prominent Lithuanian scientists like Tadas Ivanauskas, who openly expressed sympathies for U.S. conservation models early in his career, emphasizing the importance of national parks (Ivanauskas, 1921, p. 13). Ivanauskas' worldview incorporated Rousseau's skepticism toward civilization and Transcendentalist-style idealization of nature as a better antipode for humanity. In one of his important early articles, he conducted a comparative analysis of conservation practices in "the cultured

nations"—examining cases from the U.S., England, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and neighboring Poland, while arguing for their emulation in Lithuania (Ivanauskas, 1921, p. 33). He emphasized that the United States national parks are the paradigmatic model that Lithuania should follow (Ivanauskas, 1921, pp. 15–16). Ivanauskas emerged as a major pioneer among Lithuanian intellectuals in articulating an ethical imperative toward non-human life forms and advocating for its integration into educational systems (Ivanauskas, 1921, p. 3). His conviction that Lithuania required protected areas stemmed fundamentally from this biocentric obligation to ensure the flourishing of other species (Ivanauskas, 1920/21, p. 300). Ivanauskas' memoirs also show that his convictions grew from influences of Romantic philosophy, possibly even from Thoreau himself. His autobiographical account of adolescent wanderings through the Gudai Forest is a good example of that:

> "When I reached the upper gymnasium classes, I began fulfilling my childhood dream: to wander through the Gudai Forest, living like Robinson Crusoe, with only a backpack and a rifle. My self-respect did not allow me any comforts. I travelled exclusively on foot, lightly dressed, carrying no provisions beyond what I could hunt and cook over an open flame. My bed consisted only of pine needles and moss. I was accompanied solely by my dog; my only luxuries were matches, salt, and a tin kettle for boiling water. I avoided roads and paths, navigating solely by the sun and stars." (Ivanauskas, 1955, pp. 12–13)

Like Thoreau at Walden, the young Ivanauskas sought mystical communion with nature through radical simplicity. Any marks of civilization, such as trails, footbridges, or shelters, were avoided as profane intrusions into nature's sanctuary. His relationship with the environment reflected characteristically Romantic and mystical sensibilities akin to Emerson, Muir, and Rousseau himself, with the forest revealing itself as a realm of mysterious spirits (Ivanauskas, 1994, p. 16, 24). He self-identified as a "forest man" (Ivanauskas, 1955, p. 14), transported snakes in suitcases (Ivanauskas, 1955, p. 34), and kissed pine trees (Ivanauskas, 1955, p. 12). Keeping in mind the role of Ivanauskas in establishing the first environmental protection areas in Lithuania, and Muir's role in doing the same in the US, I believe I can state with some certainty that there is a significant conceptual link between Romantic philosophy (and especially Transcendentalism) on one hand and the development of environmentalism in general on the other.

Similar Romantic tendencies can be observed among other Lithuanian natural scientists of the period. For instance, Povilas Matulionis (1860–1932), who was

one of the pioneers of natural sciences in Lithuania, is characterized by Česlovas Kalenda (one of the major Lithuanian environmental philosophers and a historian of environmental ideas) as "'a man of Romantic sensibility' who could attune himself to profound natural processes, plants, and particularly to forests as ecosystems" (Kalenda, 2016, p. 13). Like other Romantics, this "man of Romantic sensibility" sought to return to a mythical golden age of unity with nature, where national culture aligned with Rousseauian agrarian ideals. In 1921, together with Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, Povilas Matulionis founded the Society for the Beautification of Lithuania (*Lietuvai pagražinti draugija*), aimed at reviving "the dormant [Lithuanian] love for trees" (Kalenda, 2016, p. 229). The Society organized symbolic tree-planting campaigns during national celebrations and established groves (Kalenda, 2007, p. 139). The aforementioned Ivanauskas and his wife were also actively involved in the activities of this Society. I want to emphasize: the neo-romantic cultural stream brought back and heavily relied on symbolic reasoning, which modernity tried to extinguish.

Romantic Stream in Lithuanian Environmental Philosophy

Influences of the Romantic interpretation of nature and American Transcendentalist philosophy can be felt in the works of certain Lithuanian environmental philosophers as well. The most prominent and influential pioneer of Neo-Romantic philosophy in Lithuania was undoubtedly Vydūnas. It is important to emphasize that, even though he probably was not the first intellectual in Lithuania to have Romanticist ideals (as many Lithuanian historians and writers indeed held Romanticist positions prior to him), Romantic philosophy—contrary to the trends of Western Europe at that time—was not popular in Lithuania in the 19th century and did not have much influence in the mainstream Lithuanian philosophical field prior to Vydūnas. The absolute majority of popular earlier philosophers in Lithuania—such as Jan Śniadecki, Anioł Dowgird, Kazimierz Narbutt, and others—followed the trends of rationalist Enlightenment, which contrasted with Romanticism. Likewise, Lithuanian philosophers of the early 20th century—Antanas Maceina, Stasys Šalkauskis, Vladimiras Šilkarskis, Pranas Kuraitis, and others—had very little relation to Romanticist ideas as well. Thus, Vydūnas—as late as his philosophy came into the picture—was a unique and pioneering philosopher in the Lithuanian academic circle. It must be acknowledged, however, that his philosophy retained the Aristotelian hierarchy of souls common among Lithuanian thinkers of his time—granting humans

exceptional status in Nature as fundamentally different from other species rather than simply one among many species (Vydūnas, 1992, pp. 83–84; 1990, p. 106). Yet, while recognizing human distinctiveness, Vydūnas significantly narrowed the gap between humans and other life forms, as well as Nature in a broad sense. He became the first Lithuanian philosopher to address ethical concerns regarding animal treatment, advocating for stricter behavioral norms:

> "Today, only a few people suspect that the commandment 'thou shalt not kill' might also apply to animals. [...] They (i.e., the animals) are chased for hours, knowing no escape from mortal fear, until finally they are shot. Everyone should reflect on this matter, if only briefly, and they would realize that hunting manifests low morality—even when practiced by those of higher social standing." (Vydūnas, 1992, p. 115)

He later expanded:

> "By observing animals more carefully, we see they differ from us less than we might suppose. Without any doubt, they have a mind. They experience desires and emotions. They express joy, sorrow, impatience, and compassion; they demonstrate intelligence and can be cunning." (Vydūnas, 1992, p. 116)

Vydūnas not only emphasized the kinship between humans and animals, but also demanded ethical conduct toward the entire natural environment, ascribing intrinsic value to the broadly conceived Nature as such. In this regard, we might consider him Lithuania's first professional ecosopher. He wrote:

> "Upon closer examination, it can be unclear where vegetation ends and animal life begins. Similarly, it is unenlightened to attempt to strictly distinguish animality from humanity [...] A noble person acts differently towards plants than a dishonorable one. They honor a plant's life more profoundly. They better perceive and value vegetation's unique qualities." (Vydūnas, 1992, pp. 104–105)

Due to Vydūnas' ideas, his commentators often describe him as a pantheistic nature-worshipper (Bagdonavičius, 1987, p. 108; Mykolaitis-Putinas, 1989, p. 302). Viktorija Daujotytė observes that in Vydūnas's works:

> "Nature [...] functions not as language's antithesis but as mediator—often initiating linguistic expressions within consciousness itself [...] Nature's spirit and spirit's nature permeate living nature through language that renders speech itself vital, nascent, generative, and generated." (Daujotytė, 2009, p. 137)

Vydūnas's relationship with nature somewhat resembles Rousseau's. Both rebelled against reason and culture detached from nature while romantically idealizing distant mystical Easts (for Rousseau, embodied by the noble savage; for Vydūnas, through Indian philosophy) and idolized bygone eras, linking them with primordial wisdom (Daujotytė, 2009, p. 255). As Antanas Vaičiulaitis noted:

> "In all his works, he concerns himself with the Lithuanian fate emerging from the ancient past [...] That past represents to our writer an inexhaustible source of virtues, vitality, and nobility that should give strength to contemporary people while providing endless creative energy for future art, morality, and love. In this sense, Vydūnas remains [...] a romantic of the past [...]" (Vaičiulaitis, 1992, p. 125)

Here I must emphasize that although Vydūnas located his philosophical starting point in distant geographical and temporal realms—as is typical for Romantics—he diverged markedly from Rousseau and other early ecosophers through his positive outlook on science and culture. As Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas noted:

> "Vydūnas [...] views modern scientific and cultural achievements optimistically, recognizing in them the seeds of further spiritual progress [...] For his pantheistic philosophical aims, pessimistic depictions of humanity's path prove unacceptable, and because of that, spiritual improvement through cyclical rebirth into life becomes not merely a philosophical premise but a historiosophical postulate." (Mykolaitis-Putinas, 1989, pp. 306–307)

In other words, Vydūnas reconciled the Romantic idealization of a mythical past and distant lands with a belief in societal progress. This synthesis emerged through the integration of Vedantic and Hindu concepts—his philosophy emphasized human perfectibility through an expanding knowledge of self and environment. This optimistic cultural outlook and faith in human exceptionalism led Vydūnas to conclusions atypical for Romantic ecosophers. For instance, he wrote that humans "as higher beings should guide nature, or to put it differently—human nature constitutes nature's particle, which simultaneously elevates it" (Bagdonavičius, 1987, pp. 100–104). By synthesizing such paradoxical conceptions of humanity, Vydūnas's work remained distant from his contemporaries; creatively, he stood more as a hermit than as a representative of the Lithuanian philosophical majority.

Among Lithuanian philosophers in the older generation (pre-1990s), only Vincas Vyčinas developed a truly ecocentric mode of thought that has surpassed

Vydūnas. Kalenda even described him as "the most ecological Lithuanian thinker" (Kalenda, 2016, p. 48), for whom "the human-nature relationship became the central problematic of his philosophy" (Kalenda, 2016, p. 39). In Vyčinas' work, Nature (with a capital N) is conceived in the broadest sense as the foundation of all existence—analogous to Spinoza's substance, a vast indeterminacy and absolute (Vyčinas, 2007, p. 404), or even God (Vyčinas, 2007, p. 407), encompassing all worldly being. Yet simultaneously, his writings reveal Nature in a much narrower, distinctly Romantic sense. As absolute, Nature never appears profane or contemptible, dreadful or unlovable. For Vyčinas, Nature is never a kind of cancer, nor the worm-eaten carcass of a fallen beast, nor mold on walls. It remains perpetually majestic, enchanting, and beautiful—strongly reminiscent of Rousseau's conception of Nature as inherently good, an embodiment of value.

In the preface to *The Search for Gods*, Vyčinas, while presenting his Lithuanian grandfather much like Rousseau's noble savage or idealized primitive man, recalls his own attempt to escape American civilization by establishing an idealized Lithuanian village in the American woods:

> "The cold interior of British Columbia, with its boundless forests, great lakes, and rivers, struck me as a land where Nature still reigned, untainted by anthropocentric technological existence. Near Vanderhoof, on the pristine banks of the Nechako River, I have decided to create a Lithuanian communal settlement called *Medeinė* [The pagan wood goddess]. I hoped to renew and promote the old Lithuanian way of life, promoting a better orientation in the place of modern man's confusion [...] When North American Lithuanians rejected my vision, the village of *Medeinė* was never realized." (Vyčinas, 2009, p. 18)

Doesn't this Medeinė project resemble Thoreau's *Walden* or Rousseau's aspiration to retreat to Białowieża? The practical disengagement from civilization seems to have been a characteristic feature among those who adhere to the Romantic conception of nature, who yearned to reintegrate with it through the example of bygone eras or idealized distant lands. It is worth noting that even in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who exerted a profound influence on Vyčinas (Vyčinas, 2002, p. 11) but is seldom examined within the context of Romantic thought, the perception of Nature carries distinct Romantic undertones. The motif of a lost connection with Being (Heidegger, 1992, p. 102), akin to Rousseau's lost paradise ideal, is very similar to the way Romantic philosophers treat the notion of Nature. For instance, in his 1951 essay *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, Heidegger posits the traditional peasant hut in

Todtnauberg (in the Black Forest), where he often stayed, as an ideal form of dwelling, contrasting it with the "fallen" state of modern construction (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 141–161), which has severed its bond with Being. The parallel between Heidegger's hut in the midst of forests and Vyčinas' envisioned village of Medeinė is obvious.

Vyčinas' Romantic inclinations are further evidenced in his proposed human ideals. He writes:

> "Mythic man is cultured in a different sense than anthropocentric man, who views nature as an infinite resource to be freely exploited. Mythic man regards nature with the deepest reverence [...] Contemporary mythologists do not consider mythic man culturally deficient. On the contrary, *some* regard his reverence for Nature as a mark of higher culture." (Vyčinas, 2009, p. 46)

Among those "some", Vyčinas himself is undoubtedly included. In his view, modern man has become subservient to the very systems he created—he has become "a servant rather than a master" (Vyčinas, 2009, p. 347), whereas:

> "[A]ncient peoples, unlike today's 'democratic' and technological man, did not live under a godless sky. [...] Their moral codes, along with their principles of reality and world perception, grew under the influence of Nature, like oaks firmly rooted in the earth and proudly raising their branches to the heavens." (Vyčinas, 2009, p. 351)

As we see, Vyčinas reiterated and adapted to Lithuanian culture the ideas of Rousseau and the Transcendentalists, adopting their Romantic perception of nature. To Lithuanian culture, Vyčinas offered an American-inspired Romantic model of ecosophy, emerging as one of the pioneers of Lithuanian ecosophical thought and among its most prominent developers to this day.

Conclusions

The analysis of paradigmatic shifts in Lithuanian environmental thought presented in this article reveals that the dominant approach towards nature has gradually moved away (or, perhaps, is still moving away) from a dualistic worldview towards a monistic ontology, which was significantly influenced by Romantic thought. These developments shaped a distinctive new approach to nature, culture, and ethics. The newly emerging ecosophy is a result of an interplay between Romantic idealism and Enlightenment rationalism, which largely echoed the philosophical and cultural developments in the 19th-century United States.

The early foundations of the ecosophical tradition are visible in the Romantic-era fascination with Lithuania's primeval landscapes, as exemplified by the attempted relocation of Rousseau to Białowieża Forest (an episode that shows how Lithuania's wilderness served as both a physical and symbolic counterpoint to Western European modernity). This Romantic sensibility in the Lithuanian cultural sphere evolved into a more systematic philosophy in the works of Vydūnas, one of Lithuania's first comprehensive ecological thinkers. While retaining elements of Aristotelian hierarchy that privileged human consciousness, Vydūnas made significant developments toward biocentric ethics by emphasizing the moral status of animals, the intrinsic value of ecosystems, and the spiritual interconnectedness of all life. Simultaneously, practical conservation efforts led by figures like Tadas Ivanauskas and Povilas Matulionis translated these philosophical principles into political and environmental action. Whether through Ivanauskas' Thoreau-like retreats into Gudai Forest or Matulionis' campaigns for reforestation and biodiversity protection, the influence of Rousseau's philosophy is evident. As our world faces an ongoing ecological crisis, the re-examination of these developments in environmental tradition can provide us with more than just a historical review of the evolution of ideas. It offers us insights into ways we could reimagine humanity's place in nature in the future. The examination of Lithuanian ecosophical transformations reminds us that philosophy is not (and never was) only a way to interpret our world, but also a means to shape our relationship with it. Changes in philosophical perspective laid the foundation for the rise of contemporary environmentalism and may serve as a basis for future change as well.

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