

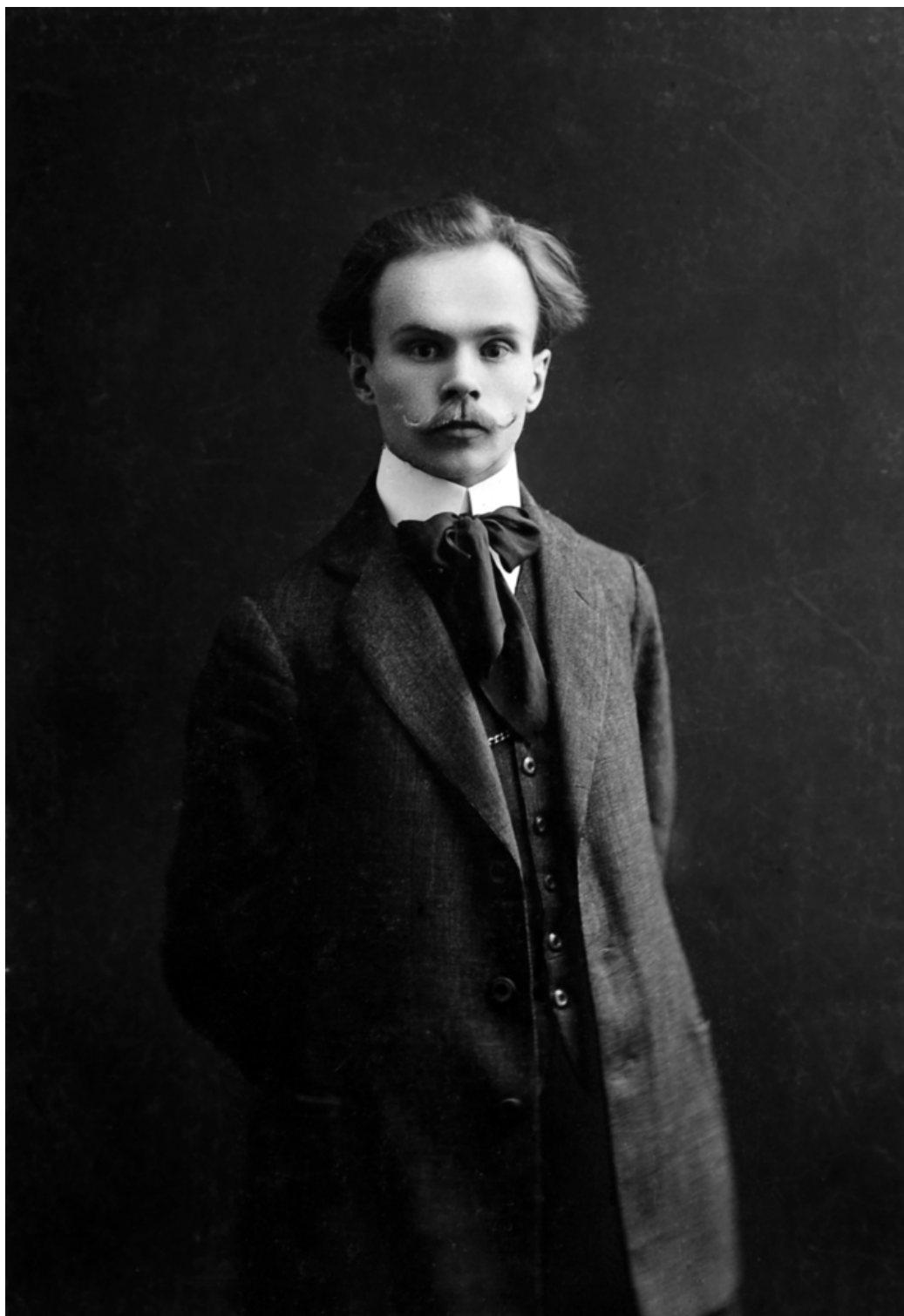
Kuprelis (The Hunchback) by Ignas Šeinius – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Justin Tonra : 6-7 minutes

This is the first of a new occasional series of articles called Distant Reading Recommends. In each article, an Action member will introduce a novel, published between 1850 and 1920, from one of the participating countries in our Action. These novels may be important or notable within the individual nation's literary tradition, but less well-known in the broader European context. By bringing these novels to light, we aim to further advance our objectives of creating a broader, more inclusive, and better-grounded account of European literary history and cultural identity.

The first article of the series comes to us from Lithuania, and is written by Saulius Keturakis of Kaunas University of Technology.

The novel *Kuprelis (The Hunchback)* was written and published in 1913 by Lithuanian writer and diplomat Ignas Šeinius (aka Ignas Scheynius). This literary work has had a paradoxical fate in Lithuanian culture: almost every Lithuanian was and still is familiar with the plot of the novel, but the novel's unique literary technique, psychological insights about gender relationships in Lithuanian culture, and logic of characters' decision-making were never repeated in Lithuanian literature. So, strictly speaking, the canon of Lithuanian literature includes the name of the author, the title of the novel, and the very basics of the plot: the novel is seldom read because of its perception as a very raw literary work.



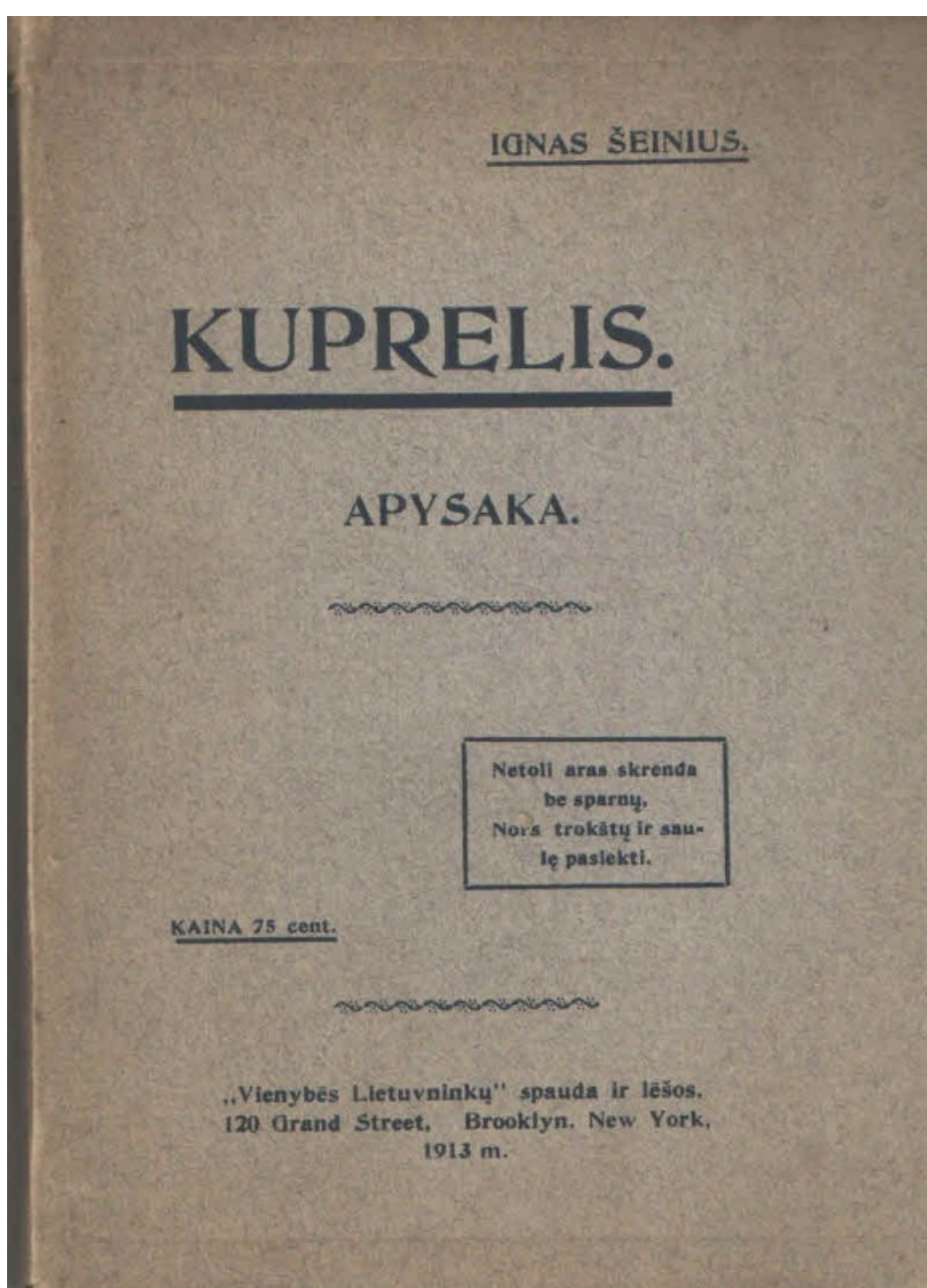
Ignas Šeinius

The novel is about a man who dreams about his flight through a happy life, but from the start he encounters the first punch of destiny – the hump, his physical disability, which separates him from the community. Still, he believes in a bright and wide world until a second punch of destiny: a hump in the heart, as the narrator says, a psychological one. He falls in love with a girl, but she runs away with a man who is uninterested in spiritual

values, but holds possession of some stolen money. In response, the Hunchback breaks down, retreats from Christianity and from community to a forest and starts his solitary inner life as a misogynist and a kind of a pagan hermit. The novel has no happy end: the narrator just leaves the broken man, who actually tells the story, alone. Not exactly alone, but surrounded by philosophical texts: Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*), Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen der Religion* (*The Essence of Christianity*), some books by Wilhem Wundt. He is possibly the first character in Lithuanian literature who discovers philosophy as the way out of a miserable life, in which he had lost everything and been left alone. And to the present day the Hunchback has no companion in Lithuanian literature in terms of his reaction to reality. His nearest associate may be Mary Shelley's Creature from *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, who, *inter alia*, tries to connect with society by reading the books that he finds. This final choice made by the Hunchback could be seen as a vision from the periphery of European culture about how to move a bit closer to the cultural centre.

The importance of this novel by Šeinius is related to its attempt to create a language for inner life events. The mind-events in Lithuanian literature before *The Hunchback* had been represented as external processes: feelings that were the cause of sweating, blushing, and weakness in the knees. *The Hunchback* changed the language of expression; the story is active as a stream of consciousness rather than a sequence of outer actions in the reality of the novel's hero. But the way the main character thinks is rather bookish. As a result, the novel was sidelined in the later history of Lithuanian literature, which gave priority to novels perceived to be more closely related to everyday life experience, and those which used a more psychologically motivated way of telling "mind stories."

The Hunchback by Ignas Šeinius is important as an intermediate stop between the literatures of the enlightenment and modernism. That is the textual kitchen, where all the main recipes of the modernist way of expression in Lithuanian were found.



The first edition of *Kuprelis*.

The novel has an interesting publication history. Until 1904, the printing of books in the native language was forbidden in Lithuania by Russia, which had annexed the country from 1795 until 1918. Almost all Lithuanian-language books during that time were published in Germany or the USA, where strong expatriate communities had settled. Even after the publication ban was lifted in Lithuania, the first edition of the novel *The Hunchback* was published in New York in 1913, while the author was studying philosophy of art in Moscow. The first edition of the novel to be published in Lithuania appeared in

1932. Plans to translate the novel are currently underway, with the first English version of the novel due for publication at the end of 2020.

Kuprelis (*The Hunchback*) will be included in the Lithuanian corpus of ELTeC at a later date. For the moment, the text of the novel (in Lithuanian) can be found at: <http://antologija.lt/text/ignas-seinius-kuprelis/01>. For further reading, see:

- Eugenijus Žmuida. Nuo Kuprelio iki Kentauro: mitopoetinės Igno Šeiniaus potekstės. In: *Acta litteraria comparativa*, Nr. 8, 2017, p. 46-61.
- Nerijus Brazauskas. XX a. lietuvių modernistinis romanas: raidos ir poetikos linkmės. Vilnius, Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2010. ISBN: 9786094250316.
- Gintaras Lazdynas. Romano struktūrų formavimasis Lietuvoje: nuo „Algimanto“ iki „Altorių šešėly“. Kaunas, Vilniaus universiteto Kauno humanitarinis fakultetas, 1999. ISBN: 9789955030041.

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