

## Vilnius—Athens of the Future

*In memory of Irena Byrska and Pranas Morkus*

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**Abstract.** The author of the article envisions Vilnius as the Athens of the North—a city that embodies spiritual and cultural strength, founded on the interaction of history, memory, and creativity. Having endured many oppressions and wars over the centuries, Vilnius has preserved its spirit, becoming a center of solidarity and intellectual life. This uniqueness of Vilnius is revealed through the ideas of Oscar Miłosz, Moyshe Kulbak, Czesław Miłosz, Irena Byrska, Pranas Morkus, Tomas Venclova, Vaidotas Daunys and others. They all emphasize the importance of *genius loci*—the spirit of the place, which shapes the identity of the city and its people. Like other cities that can be called the Athens of the North, such as Edinburgh or Tartu, Vilnius shows that culture is the cornerstone of the city’s vitality. In this context, the idea of Vilnius’s smallness emerges as a prerequisite for restoring the heritage of the past and forming a vision of the future. Today’s Vilnius, while maintaining its unique spirit, fosters solidarity, intercultural dialogue and democratic values, and becomes the basis of a new vision of European civilization, a vision in which history and values merge into a harmonious future.

**Keywords:** Athens of the North, *genius loci*, democracy, vision of a new European civilization, Vilnius, Edinburgh, Tartu, Irena Byrska, Vaidotas Daunys, Moyshe Kulbak, Oscar Miłosz, Czesław Miłosz, Pranas Morkus, Tomas Venclova.

### Vilnius – ateities Atėnai

**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje Vilnius apibūdinamas kaip Šiaurės Atėnai – miestas, įkūnijantis dvasinę ir kultūrinę stiprybę, paremtą istorijos, atminties ir kūrybos sąveika. Per amžius išgyvenęs ne vieną priespaudą ir karus, Vilnius išsaugojo savo dvasią tapdamas solidarumo ir intelektualumo centru. Šis Vilniaus unikalumas atsiskleidžia per Oskaro Milašiaus, Moišės Kulbako, Czesławo Miłoszo, Irenos Byrskos, Prano Morkaus, Tomo Venclovos, Vaidoto Daunio ir kitų idėjas. Jos pabrėžia *genius loci* – vietos dvasios, formuojančios miesto ir jo žmonių tapatybę, svarbą. Kaip ir kiti Šiaurės Atėnams priskirtini miestai – Edinburgas ar Tartu, Vilnius rodo, jog kultūra yra miesto gyvybingumo pagrindas. Šiame kontekste Vilniaus mažumo idėja iškylo kaip prielaida atkurti jame praeities paveldą ir formuoti ateities viziją. Tad nūdienos Vilnius, išlaikydamas savo unikalią dvasią, skatina solidarumą, tarpkultūrinį dialogą bei demokratines vertybes ir dėl to tampa naujos Europos civilizacijos vizijos pagrindu; vizijos, kurioje istorija bei vertybės susilieja į harmoningą ateitį.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Šiaurės Atėnai, *genius loci*, demokratija, naujos Europos civilizacijos vizija, Vilnius, Edinburgas, Tartu, Irena Byrska, Vaidotas Daunys, Moišė Kulbakas, Oskaras Milašius, Czesławas Miłoszas, Pranas Morkus, Tomas Venclova.

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## Preface

On a summer evening in June 1992, the whispers of forgotten traditions had been stirred once more in Vilnius, as Literary Wednesdays came alive within the venerable walls of Konrad’s Cell in the Basilian Monastery. This resurgence was not merely a cultural event but a ritual—an invocation of memory, drawing from the deep well of a shared past. That evening, Czesław Miłosz,<sup>1</sup> whose words had long bridged nations and generations, was honored as an honorary citizen of Vilnius by Vytautas Landsbergis,<sup>2</sup> a leader of *Sąjūdis*<sup>3</sup> and Supreme Council chair.

Among those gathered, one voice carried the wisdom of distant epochs. Irena Byrska,<sup>4</sup> a nonagenarian and luminary of the interwar Reduta Theater, spoke with the clarity of a sage. Drawing upon the teachings of ancient India, she offered a poignant reflection: “What is small has a chance to be great in spirit.” In her words, the city—a mosaic of histories, a palimpsest of resilience—seemed alive.

This idea of smallness as a crucible of greatness feels intrinsic to Vilnius, a city which grandeur is measured not in monuments or empires, but in its capacity to endure, to transform, and to inspire. As Vilnius marked its 700th anniversary in 2023, the echoes of its ethos were likened to Athens, that ancient wellspring of ideas and identity. Scholars spoke of Vilnius not in terms of its scale but in reverence for its *genius loci*—the spirit of the place that shapes its people as much as they shape it.

Two figures illuminated my own understanding of this city’s essence during those years. Irena Byrska embodied a vision of spiritual tenacity—an unyielding belief in the redemptive power of culture. Meanwhile, Pranas Morkus,<sup>5</sup> the editor of *Šiaurės Atėnai* (*The Northern Athens*) in its defining years, unraveled the paradoxes of fate and place. To him, Vilnius was not just a city but also a force, an entity that inscribed itself on the souls of its inhabitants. “A man in a struggle with fate has little chance,” he once told me, “but it is different when he takes into himself the powers of *genius loci*.” When I questioned whether the *genius loci* itself might be our fate, he smiled. His words revealed the essential truth: “You dwell too much on *loci*—left to its own pride, it becomes parochial. Everything is decided by *genius*.”

This interplay of place and spirit, of struggle and transcendence, continues to define Vilnius. It is not merely a city but a testament to what endures when the physical recedes and the spiritual takes root. Through the voices of its guardians—Oscar Miłosz,<sup>6</sup> Czesław Miłosz, Irena Byrska, Pranas Morkus, Moyshe Kulbak,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was a Polish poet, essayist, and Nobel Prize laureate in Literature (1980). Born in Šeteniai, Lithuania, he was deeply influenced by the multicultural environment of the Vilnius region. Miłosz’s works explore themes of memory, history, and the moral dilemmas of the twentieth century, shaped by his experiences of the Second World War and the oppressive regimes of his time.

<sup>2</sup> Vytautas Landsbergis (b. 1932) is a Lithuanian politician, musicologist, and a key leader in Lithuania’s independence movement. As a Chairman of the Supreme Council (1990–1992), he led the country’s peaceful transition to independence from the Soviet Union. A scholar of M. K. Čiurlionis’s works, Landsbergis later served as a European Parliament member (2004–2014). He remains a symbol of Lithuania’s fight for freedom.

<sup>3</sup> *Sąjūdis* (The Reform Movement of Lithuania), founded in 1988, was pivotal in Lithuania’s peaceful fight for independence. Uniting citizens and intellectuals, it led to the historic declaration of independence on March 11, 1990. The movement remains a symbol of national freedom.

<sup>4</sup> Irena Byrska (1901–1997) was a Polish actress and theater director, known as a co-founder of a student theater of Vilnius. She significantly influenced youth theater, focusing on education and artistic expression, leaving a lasting impact on Polish theater.

<sup>5</sup> Pranas Morkus (1938–2022) was a Lithuanian screenwriter, journalist, and public figure, known for his contributions to cinema and media.

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Miłosz (1877–1939) was a French-Lithuanian poet, diplomat, and mystic. Known for his spiritual and symbolic works, he also served as a representative of Lithuania in France during the interwar period.

<sup>7</sup> Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1937) was a Belarusian-born Yiddish poet, novelist, and playwright. His works, including *The Messiah of the House of Ephraim* (English translation in Y. Velt. New York: Wallaby, 1978) and *The Zelmanyaners: A Family Saga* (translated by H. Halkin. New Haven: Yale University Press; 2013), explore Jewish identity and folklore. Arrested during Stalin’s purges, he was executed in 1937, leaving a lasting literary legacy.

Tomas Venclova,<sup>8</sup> and Vaidotas Daunys<sup>9</sup>—Vilnius reminds us that the smallest of places can contain the greatest of worlds.

### City—Radial Center

Vilnius, named for the meandering Vilnelė River, pulses as a city of ripples—*vilnis* in Lithuanian, the waves of history, culture, and spirit. Its essence is radial, extending outward across lands and eras, from Lithuania to the other regions of Europe. Vilnius, as a city of great spirit in a small country, remains an inspiration not only for locals but also for the entire region's inhabitants.

Vilnius is not simply a city but a palimpsest of memory entrusted to Mnemosyne, the goddess of remembrance. For Miłosz, it was imbued with the Romantic reverberations of Adam Mickiewicz<sup>10</sup>; for Venclova, it reawakened the collective memory of voices nearly silenced; for Daunys, it evoked the mythic undercurrents of Mindaugas<sup>11</sup> and the Regnum. These layers exist in perpetual dialogue, transforming Vilnius into an *axis mundi*—a center from which the world may be seen anew, with its fragments reconciled.

This interplay of memory and vision is mirrored in Sejny, where the Borderland Arts and Cultures Foundation<sup>12</sup> fosters Vilnius's spirit of connectivity. Here, the cultural “waves” of Vilnius ripple outward, resonating through Central Europe and beyond. Like Athens, whose ideals of democracy once intertwined with the rhythms of daily life, Vilnius continues to emanate intellectual and spiritual energy—a hallmark of its *genius loci*.

Vilnius's vibrations flow from its people—its thinkers, artists, and builders of culture—and from the spaces where these currents meet. The Mažvydas Library (the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania) stands beside the Lithuanian Parliament, embodying the union of imagination and governance. Libraries, as loci of utopia, mirror the city's own spirit, a space where reality and aspiration converge.

As Vilnius commemorates its 700th anniversary, it carries the weight of its past while expanding into a global city. Yet, it retains the “small scale” celebrated by Byrska—not as a limitation but as a source of spiritual greatness. This smallness provides the space for renewal, reclaiming the future once fractured by totalitarianism and colonialism. In Vilnius, renewal is not an abstraction but an active unfolding, where the spirit of the past seeds the horizons of tomorrow. Those who reimagined its essence have shaped each epoch of Vilnius's history. For Miłosz, its vibrations called forth the Romantic ideals of unity and revival, breathing life into culture disrupted by war and upheaval. Venclova arrived after the Second World War, confronting the erasure of voices and striving to restore the memory of cultures, nations, and languages once vibrant in the city. Because of his efforts, Vilnius became a vessel for reconciliation, binding fragments of a shared heritage.

Daunys, a voice of the post-Soviet 1990s, sought out the city's mythic spirit. As the editor of *Regnum* and *Krantai*, he articulated Vilnius as a city of exile and return, emigration and memory. To Daunys,

<sup>8</sup> Tomas Venclova (b. 1937) is a Lithuanian poet, writer, dissident, and a co-founder of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group. He is known for his works on memory, identity, and human rights. He is a professor emeritus at Yale University.

<sup>9</sup> Vaidotas Daunys (1958–1995) was a Lithuanian poet and cultural figure, known for his lyrical poetry on nature and spirituality and his contributions to the arts.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) was a Polish-Lithuanian Romantic poet and activist. Known for “Pan Tadeusz” and “Dziady,” his works reflect patriotism and freedom, symbolizing national identity.

<sup>11</sup> Mindaugas (c. 1200–1263) was the first and only crowned King of Lithuania, who ruled from 1253. He united Lithuanian tribes, established the state, and converted to Christianity to strengthen ties with Western Europe, laying the foundation for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. See more Gudavičius, E. *Mindaugas*. Vilnius: Žara, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> The Borderland Arts and Cultures Foundation in Sejny, Poland, fosters dialogue and understanding in multicultural regions through arts, education, and community initiatives. Established in 1990, it celebrates cultural diversity and promotes borderlands as a model for intercultural harmony.

it was a city of renewal—a spiritual landscape emerging from the ruins of a fractured world. Though, as Moyshe Kulbak observed, “Nothing remains of that world of the past,” the city has reclaimed its vitality, restoring its name and spirit.

## Why Athens?

Vilnius, often hailed as the “Athens of the North,” stands among the cities that have embraced the spirit of ancient Athens—a spirit defined not by grandeur or conquest but by resistance, creativity, and the pursuit of wisdom. Unlike imperial Rome, Athens offers no legacy of domination; instead, it bequeaths ideals of democracy, intellectual freedom, and the courage to oppose oppression. It is this Athenian essence that Vilnius carries forward, not as an inheritance but as an active, living force shaping its identity and purpose.

Throughout history, cities across Europe have sought to embody this ideal. Edinburgh aspired to be the “Athens of the North” during the Scottish Enlightenment, its ambitions symbolized by the construction of a Parthenon replica.<sup>13</sup> Yet, its intellectual vibrancy was tempered by the irony of a “Southern Reykjavik,” a city caught between ideals and the weight of reality. Stockholm flourished under Queen Christina,<sup>14</sup> the “Minerva of the North,” who invited poets and philosophers to her court; however, her vision faltered under the strain of political and financial upheaval.

Tartu, cradled by the Emajõgi River and bearing its ancient name Dorpat, has long carried the aspirations of a northern Athens. In the seventeenth century, under the visionary guidance of Gustavus Adolphus,<sup>15</sup> the University of Tartu was founded as a beacon of light—a place where the sciences and the spirit of inquiry could converge. This institution symbolized a commitment to enlightenment, a sacred trust to cultivate the mind and enrich the soul.

Yet the history, with its tides of conflict and impermanence, left this dream fractured. Imperial wars swept through Tartu, silencing the university and scattering its promise. The Athenian spirit, it seemed, had been extinguished. However, Tartu, like the rivers that cradle it, is a city of renewal. In the nineteenth century, amidst Estonia’s national awakening, Tartu reclaimed its place as a hub of learning and emancipation. The city’s spirit, once dormant, surged anew, weaving together its fragmented past into a vision of freedom and cultural revival.

Similarly, Manchester, through the Warrington Academy,<sup>16</sup> embodied the Athenian model of dissent and liberal thought, challenging the entanglement of political and spiritual authority. Even as it transitioned from an industrial powerhouse to a cultural center, Manchester proved that education and culture could revive the city’s essence.

Elsewhere, Jyväskylä<sup>17</sup> in Finland emerged as a center of education and intellectual life, its roots entwined with the Athenian belief in the transformative power of knowledge. Liège in Belgium, a medieval

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<sup>13</sup> The Parthenon in Edinburgh, known as the National Monument, sits on Calton Hill and was designed by Charles Robert Cockerell and William Henry Playfair in 1823–1826. Inspired by Athens’s Parthenon, it was left unfinished due to the lack of funds.

<sup>14</sup> Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689), who ruled from 1632 to 1654, is known for her intellect, patronage of the arts, and unconventional lifestyle. She famously abdicated the throne, converted to Catholicism, and spent her later years in Rome, becoming a cultural icon of her era.

<sup>15</sup> Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden (1594–1632), known as the “Lion of the North,” was a renowned military leader and king (1611–1632). He transformed Sweden into a major European power, modernized military tactics, and championed Protestantism in the Thirty Years’ War. In 1632, he founded the University of Tartu in Estonia, fostering education and cultural growth in the region.

<sup>16</sup> Warrington Academy (1757–1786) was a dissenting English school known for its focus on science, philosophy, and theology. It shaped eighteenth-century reform, attracting figures like Joseph Priestley and Anna Laetitia Barbauld.

<sup>17</sup> Jyväskylä is a city in central Finland, known as the “Athens of Finland” for its educational institutions, including the University of Jyväskylä. Surrounded by the lakes and forests, it is also notable for its connection to architect Alvar Aalto, featuring many of his designs.

“Athens of the North,” and Valenciennes<sup>18</sup> in France, which reinvented itself through culture after the industrial decline, echoed this Athenian legacy of resilience and renewal.

Similarly, Manchester, once cloaked in the soot of its coalmines, underwent a profound metamorphosis. With the fading of its industrial pulse, the city turned its gaze inward, rediscovering its essence in culture, education, and the arts. What emerged was not merely a reinvention but a renaissance—a city reimagined as a crucible of intellectual and cultural life.

This transformation reveals the enduring truth: the vitality of a city does not reside in its industries alone but in its spirit, its capacity to root progress in the fertile soil of education and creativity. Manchester’s renewal stands as a testament to the power of culture—not as an adornment to urban life but as its foundation, a source of resilience and vision for the future.

## Why the North?

The North is not merely a direction; it is a way of being—a place to create the center of the world, not by imitating or fleeing to the South, but by standing rooted in its *genius loci*. This spirit is embodied in Vilnius, often called the “Athens of the North,” a city where education and culture intertwine with deep spiritual and intellectual heritage.

Oscar Milosz envisioned Vilnius as a beacon of renewal amid a civilizational crisis. Long before the Second World War, he foresaw Europe faltering under the weight of conflict and disarray, with the North rising as a sanctuary of spiritual revival. This vision, profoundly symbolic, framed the North not as a mere refuge but as a source of moral clarity and new beginnings.

Today, Milosz’s insights carry renewed urgency. As the Mediterranean and Middle East face the strains of climate change, conflict, and resource scarcity, migration flows north—not just of people but of ideas, culture, and values. The North is called to offer more than shelter; it must become a guiding light for transformation.

Vilnius holds this potential as a bridge between the past and the future. Its designation as the “Athens of the North” reflects its role as a center of culture, education, and dialogue. Despite the disruptions of history, Vilnius has retained its spiritual essence, standing resilient as a city of harmony and renewal. Milosz believed that the challenges of a fractured world could not be met by pragmatism alone but required a spiritual response. He envisioned Lithuania as a moral and intellectual sanctuary, offering a foundation for Europe’s renewal.

Algirdas Julius Greimas<sup>19</sup> echoed this idea, proposing a cultural council to guide Lithuania’s future. Greimas viewed culture as the central axis of national identity and progress, balancing economic development with sustainability and depth. This vision aligns seamlessly with Milosz’s hope for Vilnius as a moral and intellectual leader.

In the 1990s, the publication *Šiaurės Atėnai* championed these ideals, emphasizing Lithuania’s place in Europe as rooted in universal values: democracy, civic rights, and shared responsibility. These Athenian principles, which once formed the foundation of Western civilization, remain vital today. They remind us that Europe is not merely an economic or political project but a cultural one—a shared humanity that binds history to the future.

As the climate crisis deepens and geopolitical changes reshape our world, Vilnius has the opportunity to lead by example. It can champion sustainability, democracy, and cultural renewal, offering solutions that honor tradition while embracing a more inclusive and harmonious future.

<sup>18</sup> Valenciennes, a city in northern France, has been known for its rich artistic heritage and as a center of painting during the seventeenth century. Dubbed the “Athens of the North,” it carries a legacy of culture, industry, and education, blending history with modern development.

<sup>19</sup> Algirdas Julius Greimas (1917–1992) was a Lithuanian-French semiotician known for the Greimas, or Semiotic square and contributions to structural semiotics, profoundly shaping modern humanities.



Vilnius, luminous yet grounded, embodies the strength of the North. It is a city poised to inspire a new chapter for Europe, a reminder that the *genius loci* of the North can serve as both a mirror of history and an architect of the future. As the “Athens of the North,” Vilnius stands ready to reawaken Europe’s cultural heart, creating a better path forward through empathy, solidarity, and shared purpose.

### Miłosz’s U-topia of Vilnius

Thinking about the city’s future 700 years from now raises essential questions: What kind of Vilnius do we want to be proud of? How can we harness the city’s cultural and spiritual potential? Here, utopia emerges—not as an unattainable dream but as a necessary vision for an ideal city. One Ukrainian poet deconstructed the word “utopia” into *you-topia*—a place for “you.” This reminds us that utopia is not an abstract dream but a goal, the pursuit of which shapes our future.

Courage is an essential part of this path. Vilnius must remain a beacon—a city radiating culture and ideas in the contemporary world, which is full of dramas and catastrophes. Our responsibility is to think about how we will shape the city’s future, nurture its spirit, and build bridges between the past and the future.

For example, Czesław Miłosz’s 1940s poem about Vilnius conveys the city’s internal conflicts.<sup>20</sup> The poem tells the story of a Russian soldier who arrives with the Red Army and his relationship with a local woman. The soldier rents a room from an older woman, speaking of good and evil, but his values, shaped by the regime of the past, clash with the northern spirit of the city. This contrast is so profound that the soldier ultimately takes his own life, unable to reconcile these two worlds.

This text by Miłosz reflects not only past conflicts but also the question of how Vilnius can become a space where diverse cultures and ideas converge. Vilnius is already a city where numerous historical, political, and cultural layers intersect. Its future depends on how we use this heritage, integrate it into the modern world, and define its “radiance” for future generations. As an ideal city, Vilnius can become not just a utopia but also a real example of how culture, democracy, and shared values can form the foundation for urban development. Though not always easy, this path offers the opportunity to create a new stage in European civilization centered on culture and spirituality.

Cities like Vilnius possess unique potential for transformation. When confronted with challenges or evils, they are places where people can not only survive but also change, find community support, and discover new meaning. History shows that the cities can become spaces of conflict, healing, and renewal.

Vilnius’s metaphor of Athens should not be understood as an ambition to become a dominant city in Europe. This concept is much broader and more profound. Athens, unlike Rome, symbolizes spiritual power, culture, democracy, and solidarity. Rome represents empires and centralized authority, whereas Athens reflects cities that seek alternative paths and embody the strength of communities.

Vilnius can be small and slow, but that is precisely its strength. In Miłosz’s poetry, Vilnius is portrayed not as a mighty Rome but as a small yet significant center of culture and spirituality. It is a city that, like Dublin, Copenhagen, Sarajevo, or Chernivtsi, serves as a capital of the European family—a place where cultures, history, and values merge into a shared heritage.

In his works, Miłosz calls for Europe to see itself as a family without a single center of power or authority. Vilnius and other similar cities can become part of this family. The many “Athenses” across Europe represent an opportunity to create a new model of solidarity—one without a single Rome, a single power monopolizing the world, but rather many cities which strength lies in their culture and collaboration.

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<sup>20</sup> See Miłosz, C. Tenant. In: Miłosz, C. *Second Space: New Poems* / Translated by the author and R. Hass. New York: Ecco HarperCollins, 2004, p. 15–16.

It is a city, which could foster European cohesion through solidarity and unity with others. This concept is not only cultural or symbolic but also a practical idea grounded in the cultivation of shared values, mutual support, and a collective vision for the future.

The numerous “Athens” across Europe symbolize the possibility that not one imperial power but a network of communities and cultures could form the true foundation of Europe. For Vilnius, as for other cities, it is essential to understand its place in this network and, drawing from its culture and history, actively contribute to this vision.

As a city, Vilnius encompasses not just architecture and history but also a unique spirit created by its residents, neighborhoods, multilingualism, and cultural diversity. Miłosz’s poetry about the city speaks of its external beauty and invisible qualities—moral values, community, and harmony—that allow the city to remain a fully human habitat.

In the poem “The Pupil,” Miłosz highlights values that transcend material wealth or fame. He writes about the city where great thinkers and ideas are born, the city, founded not in money but in pursuing values and life’s meaning. Another poem, beginning with the words “Lilacs bloom in Vilnius,” emphasizes the importance of the city’s harmony. Miłosz writes of *integritas*—the understanding that the city is multifaceted, yet its essence lies in harmony between its different voices and neighborhoods. He also stresses *claritas*—the moral clarity that emanates from the city and its culture.

Vilnius, as the Athens of the North, can offer an alternative to the world of the powerful, where Darwinian principles of “natural selection” often become a pretext for evil agendas. Miłosz envisions the Athenian spirit as a counterpoint to the world of the strong, where power and dominance are the ultimate laws. Athens, and by extension Vilnius, symbolize the possibility of building the world that values the strength of smallness, community, and the ability to live without subjugating others.

The poetry of Miłosz, Mickiewicz, and Venclova reveals the idea of the city as a unified community. The essence of Vilnius lies in what connects its various districts, people, riverbanks, and bridges, reflecting its shared heart. Kulbak, in his poems, speaks of Vilnius as an amulet that unites the city’s diversity, the loss of which would signify the loss of self.

The spirit of Vilnius lies in its ability to become an alternative to the world of the powerful. A city based on community, solidarity, and culture can be a place for survival and spiritual renewal. By fostering these values, the citizens of Vilnius can make their city a center of life and moral resilience.

Cities like Vilnius are physical spaces and spiritual islands where community, culture, and architecture merge into a unified whole. By nurturing these values and understanding that the city’s strength lies in its harmony and diversity, Vilnius can remain a strong and inspiring member of the European community.

### Daunys’ U-topia of Vilnius

Daunys unveils Vilnius as far more than a city—it is a living mystery, a sacred passage where physical and spiritual boundaries dissolve.<sup>21</sup> Like Saint Christopher wading through waters with the weight of a child, Vilnius is perpetually in motion, bridging one shore to the next, carrying its name and essence across divides. It transforms not through conquest or dominion but through the sacred act of speaking, where language itself becomes both invocation and creation.

For Daunys, as for Miłosz, Vilnius is not simply a geographical place but a spirit, a word waiting to be spoken. It is a city of perpetual becoming, revealing itself only through the act of utterance. To return to Vilnius is not merely to arrive—it is to come home to the resonance of its syllables, to awaken the city by speaking its name. “Pronounce!” Daunys implores. In pronouncing Vilnius, the city reveals

<sup>21</sup> Wilno: *imię i słowo* / zdjęcia V. Balčytis; tekst V. Daunys; przekł. z jęz. lit. B. Kaleda. Vilnius: Regnum; 1993.

itself—not as a static monument but as a living, breathing presence. The city invites to engage with its essence, suggesting that by approaching its symbolic gates with intention, its vibrant spirit and voice will be revealed in return.

This sacred dialogue—between the city and its name, between the self and the other—binds past and present. To pronounce Vilnius is to summon not only its streets and tenements but also its lineage of languages, cultures, and histories. A Lithuanian meets Greek; a Jew meets Pole; a Rusyn meets Tatar. Yet in this convergence, Vilnius transcends its parts, becoming a singular, luminous essence—a name that sanctifies all who call it home.

The 1993 publication<sup>22</sup> featuring Vytautas Balčytis's<sup>23</sup> photographs captures this spirit of Vilnius as a dialogue partner, a city that speaks when we approach it with intention. For Vilnius, the word is inseparable from its vibrations; it resonates through its stones, its streets, and its people. To speak Vilnius is to move, to carry its spirit across divides. Like Christopher, this act of carrying and naming is one of mercy—a welding of one life to another, one sign to the next, until the city garments itself anew in the shared fabric of its people.

Daunys emphasizes that the palate connects us to what was sown before all silence—the essence of the word. Through the act of speaking, we recognize each other; through the name, we awaken the city's communal identity. Vilnius is not merely built of stone and timber but of language and memory, of voices that echo through time. It is a city of maturation, always becoming, a luminous presence that transcends the confines of geography to bridge fractured landscapes of humanity.

Miłosz's *City without a Name* echoes these themes: the word creates the city, and the name evokes it. Vilnius becomes visible when syllable lays by syllable, when the word becomes a name, when one man calls to another, and a shore invokes a shore. In this act of naming and carrying, the lineage of Vilnius's name is woven into the eternal fabric of its becoming.

Vilnius's essence lies in its ability to transcend. It is a city of clearances and mercy, where tenements lean into one another, welding life to life. It is not static; it glows with an intimate light of recognition—a word made flesh, voices joined in harmony. Through language, memory, and connection, Vilnius becomes more than a place. It is a living bridge, a promise to carry its essence forward, to remain, always, a city in motion.

Here, Vilnius speaks, and in speaking, it invites us to listen—to recognize, to carry, to pronounce its name anew. It is a testament to the boundless potential of community and shared spirit, a city born of its dialogue with the world and its eternal passage toward becoming.

### **Tri-River—Tri-Vilnius—Vilnis**

*Vi(a)-the passage*—Vilnius, the city of Christopher, is deeply tied to the symbolism of passage and service. The state's coat of arms, known as the "Chase," depicts a pre-Christian knight with a sword raised high, representing defense and protection. In contrast, the city's Christian coat of arms features Christopher carrying the baby Jesus across the river, symbolizing crossing, service, and connection to the other shore.

These symbols embody a duality: fortress, defense, and border on one side; passage, crossing, and service to others on the other. During the Soviet period, both coats of arms were banned, suppressing this layered identity. Yet, within the image of Christopher lies a deeper, pagan origin: a mythical hero carrying his wife across rushing rapids.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>23</sup> Vytautas Balčytis (b. 1955) is a Lithuanian photographer, a pioneer of the aesthetics of boredom in Lithuanian photography and a master of social landscape imagery.



This imagery reflects the city's essence as a ford—a place of crossing. Similar to Frankfurt or Oxford, Vilnius was shaped by its tri-river geography: the Neris, the Vilnia, and a third river that now flows underground. These rivers form the foundation of Vilnius as a city of passage, where its identity as a crossing point is deeply woven into its historical and symbolic fabric.

*L(ux)* – light in Vilnius, as described by Miłosz, is not about excessive brilliance or grandeur. “What’s too bright and too high—it’s not for me,” he reflects in *City without a Name*. Instead, he thinks of low light—subtle and grounded.

Kulbak deepens the imagery, portraying light as a symbol of both consolation and fragility, likened to the ethereal nature of a summer mist at the edge of the world. He describes Vilnius as a dark amulet nestled in Lithuania, a place embodying the mystical essence of a cabalist’s dream, where the city transforms into a labyrinth of countless narrow doors leading to the universe.

This light is what binds the community together. The Theban candlesticks from *City without a Name*, carried by servants into the house, symbolize a shared ritual. These candlesticks allude to the spirituality and traditions of freemasonry, carrying, like sails, the essence of the Greek light.

*(Pol)is*: the future of Vilnius lies in its quest to redefine itself as a modern form of community—a *Vilnopolis*. At the heart of this vision is the city’s unique geography and history. The center of the Vilnius amphitheater at the confluence of rivers is marked by a tree-covered hillock, a steep cliff smoothed by human hands. Such hills, common in Lithuania, are known as fortified settlements or hill forts (Lithuanian: *piliakalnis*). The word itself means “castle mountain” or “mounded mountain,” and its first part resonates deeply with the Greek *polis*.

This connection draws on the ancient idea of the *polis*—a community centered on intimacy and shared values. Vilnius’s transformation from a *megapolis*,<sup>24</sup> with sprawling urban complexity, and a *xenopolis*,<sup>25</sup> marked by disconnection and alienation, toward a *Vilnopolis* reflects a return to small-scale, connective living. It is a vision rooted in tradition but open to modern reinterpretation, creating a city where history and community intertwine to shape its future.

## Coda

The Vilnius University Observatory tower, an emblem of the city’s spirit, is adorned with a Baroque facade decorated with painted signs of the zodiac. Virgil’s timeless Latin maxim *Virtus novum lux mundum vetus illuminat*—“Courage illuminates the old world with the new light” is inscribed on it.

This motto encapsulates Vilnius’s mission: to honor its history, while boldly illuminating the future. The light it radiates is not merely physical but profoundly spiritual—the light of courage and renewal capable of transforming the world. The tower stands as a reminder that Vilnius is a city of bridges, connecting the past and the future, tradition and innovation, all under the guiding glow of its enduring values.

## Disclosure statement

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<sup>24</sup> In ancient Greece, a *megapolis* referred to a large and influential city-state, serving as a political, cultural, and economic hub. It symbolized the grandeur of urban life but also highlighted challenges of scale and cohesion.

<sup>25</sup> *Xenopolis* refers to a „city of strangers,“ where urban alienation and disconnection dominate. It contrasts with cohesive communities, highlighting the challenges of modern cities shaped by globalization and urban sprawl.

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