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## **Juozas Kėkštas's Existential Fight for Freedom and the Musicality of His Poetry**

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Lithuanian émigré poet Juozas Kėkštas (Adomavičius, 1915–1981) lived across Europe and South America, experiencing repeated arrests, Soviet imprisonment, and wartime service in Anders' army, later organizing Lithuanian periodicals in Rome and Buenos Aires. This paper examines the stages of his emigration and focuses on the peculiarities and musicality of his poetry using comparative methodology and existing scholarship. It argues that his work blends rebellious expressionism, avant-garde poetics, existentialism, and žemininkai ideas, unified by themes of freedom and solitude, while extensive musical imagery and formal analogues (variations, rondo, compound forms) shape its emotional dramaturgy.

**Keywords:** Lithuanian Emigration Literature, Juozas Kėkštas, Poetry, Intermediality, Musicality

### **Introduction**

Lithuania does not count large numbers of military poets who are involved in fights for countries other than their Homeland, which fight for universal justice, ideals and liberation of all humanity from fascist dictatorship. In this respect, the poetry of Juozas Kėkštas (1915–1981), a poet of complex fate and supreme ideals, takes an exceptional place in Lithuanian literature as well. Though it is away from the traditional canon, it is artistically evocative with unique idealistic edge, revealing the drama of struggle and existential solitude. The following poetry collections by Kėkštas were published: “Toks gyvenimas” [This life], 1938, “Rudens dugnu” [At the Bottom of Autumn's Abyss], “Staigus horizontas” [Abrupt Horizon], both in 1946, “Diena naktin” [Day into Night], 1947, “Ramybė man” [Peace to Me], 1951, “Etapai” [Stages], 1953.

The aim of this article is to discuss the peculiarities and the musicality of Kėkštas's poetry. To achieve this goal, the stages of emigration from Lithuania will be briefly presented, the features of Kėkštas's life, work and the musicality of his poetry will be discussed. The article draws on the works of Nastazija Kairiūkštytė, Malgorzata Kasner, Alma Lapinskienė, Dalia Satkauskytė, Werner Wolf, and others, and resorts to comparative methodology.

First, I will briefly introduce **the periods of emigration in Lithuania and the stages of emigrant literature**. 1. Emigration from Lithuania began in the era of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 16th–17th c., prompted by religious conflicts and later by the tightening of serfdom and by wars (VLE: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/emigracija/>). 2. In the 18th–19th c., political emigration followed the partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1794), the uprisings (1830–1831, 1863–1864), and deportations carried out by the Russian Empire. In total, from the late 19th c. to 1914, about 0,4 million Lithuanians left for various countries, most of them were young men of working age (about 70% of all emigrants). 3. The establishment of independent Lithuania (in 1918) and the start of land reform (1919–1922) temporarily slowed Lithuanian emigration; overall, however, 102,500 people emigrated from Lithuania between 1920 and 1940. In the 4 decades, roughly the total of 1,5 million Lithuanians lived outside Lithuania. 4. For Lithuanian literature, the most significant wave is the political emigration after 1940, driven by coercion and other circumstances under the occupation regimes of Germany and especially the USSR. This is the largest emigration wave in Lithuania's history: in the 1950s–1960s alone, about one-third of the population

left Lithuania. From 1940 to 1989, the following streams can be distinguished: the repatriation of Germans, Poles, and later Jews; evacuees and wartime refugees; persons taken for forced labour; those deported (the deportations of Lithuanian residents) and those imprisoned in camps (the imprisonment of Lithuanian residents). 5. After Lithuania restored Independence (in 1990), the emigration of non-Lithuanians intensified, especially of Russians; most of them left in the last decade of the 20th c.: 27,300 people emigrated in 1993, followed in later years by several thousand annually. 6. From the late 20th to the early 21st c., emigration from Lithuania to Western European countries and the United States expanded for economic reasons (ibid.)

**The most important stage for Lithuanian literature was emigration during the World War II** and in its aftermath. Then about 70 percent of Lithuanian writers emigrated as a result of the USSR occupation (VLE: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/lietuviu-iseivijos-literatura/>). They first entered refugee camps in Germany, and in 1947–1948 the majority emigrated to the United States, as well as to Great Britain and Australia. In this period, figures of culture and letters were exceptionally productive: they founded publishing houses, issued literary periodicals, almanacs, and textbooks, and published 216 books of fiction. Exile literature of this time is marked by catastrophism, literary existentialism, and aestheticism—currents of modernist art shaped by the tragedy of the WWII and by Western philosophy (S. A. Kierkegaard, A. Schopenhauer, F. Nietzsche, J. Ortega y Gasset, M. Heidegger, J.-P. Sartre, etc.).

**Lithuanian exile literature was produced by writers of different generations.** 1. Among the older generation, the predominant genres are memoirs, diaries, and philosophical reflections (Vincas Krėvė, USA; Jurgis Savickis, France, USA; Ignas Šeinius, Sweden; etc.). 2. The works of the middle generation are characterized by motifs of nostalgia for the homeland and patriotic rhetoric (Bernardas Brazdžionis, USA; Jonas Aistis, France and USA; Faustas Kirša, USA, etc.). 3. The representatives of the new generation are divided into a) *žemininkai* (*lankininkai*) [“with the land”] and b) *bežemiai* [“the landless”]. The *žemininkai* were writers who had grown up and been educated in independent Lithuania but came to artistic maturity in the West: Juozas Kėkštas, Kazys Bradūnas, Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, Henrikas Nagys, Vytautas Mačernis. This is the generation that in 1951 in the USA published an anthology of new poetry, “Žemė” [Earth]. What unites these poets is the search of the meaning of human existence on earth and the sacred relationship to the land, mythology, and folklore also comes to the fore (especially in Bradūnas’s work). Later many prose writers joined this trend: Marius Katiliškis, Aloyzas Baronas, Birutė Pūkelevičiūtė, and others. The *bežemiai* generation is conventionally called the “generation of the forties” (4th decade), which entered literature after the *žemininkai*, and debuted and matured already in exile: Liūnė Sutema, Algimantas Mackus, Antanas Škėma, the literary scholar Rimvydas Šilbajoris, sociologist Vytautas Kavolis, and others. In their works, unlike that of the *žemininkai*, there is no longer a pronounced sense of loss and nostalgia. They raise questions of life’s meaning, doubt accepted truths, and frequently employ motifs of emptiness and non-being. 4. Literature of the generation of the 1960s and younger: writers born outside Lithuania; their works are characterized by a mythologized relationship to Lithuania, cultural intertexts, and a metaphorical, modernist style. Some of them write in English. 5. After Lithuania restored Independence (1990), exile literature was republished in Lithuania. Anthologies of exile prose and poetry, compendia of writers of the Lithuanian diaspora were compiled (1995, 2006, 2007, 2019, 2022); an anthology of works by English-language Lithuanian writers appeared. The works by the new emigrants in Lithuania have been published in great numbers (ibid.).

#### **The Features of Juozas Kėkštas Life and Work**

One of the emigrant writers with an exceptional life was Juozas Kėkštas (birth name Adomavičius). He was born on 19 November 1915 in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) to a railway worker and a seamstress. His father died early, and in 1921 his mother returned with her five children to Vilnius under Polish occupation when Juozas was six years old. Forced by hardship, she placed the children in Lithuanian dormitories. In 1923 Juozas began primary school; in winter not to get frozen he would run some kilometres to school in his short trousers. From 1926 he studied at Vytautas Magnus Gymnasium. As a classmate Vlada Rusokaitė-

Pajaujienė wrote: “Nature endowed him with an attractive appearance, with gifts, and, most importantly, with a noble character and love of people. A sense of beauty, the music of the word, drew him to poetry, but his innate altruism and compassion for those in need compelled him to join very actively in the struggle against evil” (quoted from Lapinskienė, 2006, p. 82 ). The painful daily experience of social injustice and a rebellious spirit ignited in the future poet’s heart a flame of revolutionary romanticism and drew him to the left politics. In 1930, while in the fourth class of the gymnasium, Kėkštas joined Komsomol and engaged in underground activities. After a couple of years, he was arrested for the first time, but for lack of evidence was released after two months. With difficulty—and with the help of teachers—he managed to return to the gymnasium and continue his studies. Increasingly, as Kėkštas himself put it, he felt a growing “poetic vocation.” He wrote poems, read journals “*Trečias frontas*” [The Third Front] and “*Kultūra*” [Culture], and left orientation works by Kazys Boruta, Petras Cvirka, Salomėja Nėris. The poet admired Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergey Yesenin, and Polish revolutionary poets, especially Władysław Broniewski. He did not abandon the underground group and, at the beginning of 1934, was again arrested and sentenced to 4 years in prison, followed by five years without civil rights. Kėkštas was released early under an amnesty, lacking civil rights, he could not obtain regular work. For some time he labored on the construction of embankments of the river Neris (Satkauskytė, 2015). He wrote ever more and took part in Lithuanian poetry evening readings. In his words, the fire of poetry blazed up. Later he was again arrested and sent to the Bereza Kartuska concentration camp.

Released in late autumn 1937 and Kėkštas settled with his sister in Poland. At that time, he experienced not only loneliness but also a profound disillusionment with an idea in which he had believed and which shook his spirit. The poet admits that 1936 and 1937 were for him years of an inner crisis—continuing and tormenting. “By nature I am a humanist. And an individualist. If I grew ardent about communism, it was because I loved in it what is beautiful and exalted. <...> But I no longer wish to suffer for an idea grounded in blood and killings, where those killings are carried out as art is created for art’s sake. <...> I am looking for a new god,” he wrote in a letter that reads like a painful confession, adding that out of that tangle of feelings and thoughts his poems were born (Kėkštas, 1995 Nr 11, p. 124).

In his first collection of poems, “Toks gyvenimas” [This Life] (1938), the poet addresses not his Homeland, but for „lietuviškoji liaudie“ [Lithuanian folks], declares love not for the Homeland, but for people in need<sup>1</sup>:

Aš pamilau	I fell in love
Tave	with You
pirma	my first,
karšta	fierce,
jaunuolišką meilę,	youthful love
kai	when
pamačiau	I saw
sukaustyta,	you shackled,
vargų išsekintą,	worn thin by hardship,
sukniubusią. <sup>2</sup>	slumping.
(24)	(24)

In the autumn of 1938 Kėkštas moved to Warsaw, studied at the private university Wolna Wszechnica, became acquainted with W. Broniewski, and translated Polish poets. After the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, with Vilnius already returned to Lithuanian, he was appointed an education inspector; however,

<sup>1</sup> Here and below the poems are quoted from: Juozas Kėkštas. „Dega vėjai“. Poems, translations, articles, letters. Vilnius: Vaga, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Here and below is a literal translation of poems by Antanas Brūzga.

in March 1940 Kėkštas was soon arrested by the Soviet authorities and sentenced to 8 years in prison, to a hard labour camp in Kirov region, this time, as a member of the Polish “nationalist” communist party. When war broke out between the Soviet Union and Germany, after a 1,5 year he was amnestied as a Polish citizen.

As Kėkštas’s creative researcher Malgorzata Kasner wrote: “*Freedom, for Kėkštas, is not a philosophical abstraction; it is a life problem that takes on very concrete, real contours. It is a longing for a world without bars, without pressure, without persecution*” (Kasner, 2002, p. 39-40). For the romantic poet, the opposition between good and evil is sharpened to the utmost; individual manifestations of evil no longer matter to him—what concerns him is the liberation of all humankind. The desire for perfection accentuates the gap between the ideal and reality; half-tones vanish, contrasts emerge. The poems of this period are marked by sharp oppositions of imagery: good versus evil, light versus darkness, and solitude behind prison bars, and by a particularly strong commitment to freedom:

ŪŽKITE, VĒTROS

<...>

Kovokit – vėjai!

Ūžkite – vėtros!

Šėlkit – uraganai!

Aš su jumis!

Minčių man pančiais niekas

neužngniauš.

Nors iš jūs tarpo plėšo degančias

širdis,

tokias kaip mano –

žinau, kad rytas, naujas rytas –

greit išauš!

(48)

ROAR, O TEMPESTS

<...>

Fight – ye winds!

Roar – o tempests!

Rage – ye hurricanes!

I am with you!

No man shall stifle my thoughts with chains.

Though from your ranks they tear out burning

hearts,

such as mine –

I know, morning, a new morning –

shall dawn soon!

(48)

For the sake his the ideal, the poet is ready “to cast everything upon the altar,” to “strike a spark with his heart and illuminate the night”. The poet wrote in a letter to Vladas Drėma: “My nature still contains the demand to devote and dedicate myself wholly to something. If I know that what I respect (it may be an idea or something else), what I love, is worthy of dedication—I give up everything. Then even suffering is dear” (Kėkštas, 1995, Nr. 11, p. 125). Happiness and justice are subjects not for oneself, but for the others:

TOKS GYVENIMAS

<...>

Nors ir bedalis, skurdžius, driskis –

einu aš saulės nurašyt snieguotomis

palaukėm,

kad tų veiduos, kam duosiu ją –

džiaugsmingą šypseną išvysčiau.

<...> (54)

THIS LIFE

<...>

Though luckless, destitute, a vagabond –

I go to pluck the sun along snowy waysides,

so that in the faces of those to whom I give it

I may behold a joyful smile.

<...> (54)

Prisons and concentration camps in Vilnius, then under Polish occupation<sup>1</sup>, also created the preconditions for a kind of inner emigration. The young poet’s sensitivity to social phenomena, his pursuit of truth and justice, and a romanticized fascination with communist ideology became the ground of an existential

<sup>1</sup> In the Vilnius region under Polish occupation at that time, a cultural and national genocide of Lithuanians was taking place: in over twenty years of rule up to the WWII, about 300 Lithuanian schools and other institutions were closed.

turning point that later laid out the path of the emigrant: of solitude and aloneness. It is clear that under Polish occupation Lithuanian cultural evenings and the organization of Lithuanian publications could hardly have pleased the Polish authorities of the day. This activity, though modest in scope, for the sake of Lithuanian, may also have added to the underground communist activity charges and worsened the prison sentences imposed on the young man, still a schoolboy. Thus, the idealistic fighter for justice, a sensitive and courageous poet of Promethean spirit, is separated from society and from the beloved of his dreams—becoming a stranger in his own country (poetry collection “Toks gyvenimas” [This Life], 1938):

PRISIKĖLIMAS

Iš debesų man sukaldė karstą,  
Į karstą gyvenimą šonkauliais grūdo,

žvaigždes ant varsčio sunarstę –  
manė – skaudžiau,  
kad aštriau,  
kad supūdys.

Ir slinko suskaldytos dienos,  
kaip slenka kareivis su nukirsta koja,  
pjudomas,  
keikiamas,  
vieniškai vienišas.  
<...> (51)

RESSURECTION

Out of clouds, a coffin was hammered for me,  
Into the coffin life was crammed using my ribs,

the stars threaded on a cord –  
they thought – more painful,  
sharper,  
would set in the rot

And the split days dragged on,  
as a soldier drags with leg cut off,  
hounded,  
cursed,  
utterly alone.  
<...> (51)

This period of Kėkštas’s poetry shows stylistic character that is akin to Kazys Boruta’s “squally” tradition (Satkauskytė, 2015) which is a variant of revolutionary romanticism, a combination of romantic worldview and avant-garde poetry, Prometheistic posture of the subject. Kėkštas’s poems are uniquely distinguished by the Christian underlay (motifs of sacrifice and redemption) of the revolutionary romanticism.

The second stage of life and work is connected to the soldier’s fate. In autumn of 1941 Kėkštas joined General W. Anders’s Polish Army and departed for Persia, later served in Iran, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt, and then travelled to Rome. Kėkštas’s romantic idealism – his struggle for justice, his search for truth and freedom, coupled with existential solitude helps to explain his resolve to enlist. In the battles the poet was twice wounded, and was decorated with Polish, Italy and British military orders. Since 1945 Kėkštas settled in Rome and worked as an editor of a periodical “Lietuvių laikraštis” [Lithuanian paper]. In the poetry collections published after the WWII (“Rudens dugnu” [At the Bottom of Autumn’s Abyss], 1946) and “Staigus horizontas” [Abrupt Horizon], 1946) the experiences of the soldier are reflected and the moods of catastrophism intensify:

RUDENS DUGNU

<...>

Tragingos epochos tragingą dangų  
akyse nešioju,  
o akys neranda  
spinduliu žėrinčio rytdienos kranto.

<...> (57)

Vilnius, 1938 m.

AT THE BOTTOM OF AUTUMN’S ABYSS

<...>

The tragic sky of a tragic epoch  
I carry about with me in my eyes,  
and my eyes cannot find the future’s shores  
that so bright used to shine.

<...> (57)

Vilnius, 1938.

Translated by Dorian Rottenberg

One of the most artistically accomplished war-themed poems in Kėkėštas's oeuvre is considered to be "Majoly žydi aguonos" [Maioli Blooms with Poppies]:

Kalnų šlaitai – amfiteatras, kareivis – aktorius pilkas,  
dekoracija – uolos ir dūmai, alyvos ir kraujo aguonos.  
Einame tamsūs klajūnai gyvenimo lūžtančiais tiltais,  
laisvės ir laimės išalkę kaip vargšas kasdienės duonos.

Maioly mirtis ir kraujas, aguonom žydi Maioli.  
Aguonos raudonos kaip kraujas, krauju žydi kalnai ir lankos.  
Ilgos lavonų eilės. Bendran čia sugulė guolin anglas, prancūzas, italas, indas, graikas ir lenkas.

(Tie, kurie krito, karą pamiršo ir nieko nežino, laimingi, negirdi vaitojančio draugo, granatų sprogo, Cairo, Mass Albaneta, San Angelo, Monte Cassino – jiems žuvo kaip sapnas, kaip jie.)

Keliai, kuriais einam Ryman,  
be tiltų ir kelrodžių lūžta, akmeniu, dūmais ir dulkėm  
smaugia lakštingalų dainą ir vyšniom žydingius sodus.  
Drauge, bedalis kaip aš, neklupk kely ir nepulki,  
nors nuovargis kerta tau kojas ir naktys užgula juodos.  
Mums kantatų ir himnų nereikia, nereikia patoso ir melo,  
mirtis paprasta ir gyvenimas paprastas. Laukt ilgiau negalėjom,  
vagabundų dalia nebemiela. Reikia antro galo nakties Pompėjai! Todėl, čia ne gyventi, bet mirti atėję,  
karo Vezuvijaus lavą ant tanko ir šautuvo nešam.

Mountain slopes – amphitheatre, soldier – grey actor,  
decoration – cliffs and smoke, olive trees and blood poppies.  
We walk, dark wanderers, across life's crumbling bridges  
hungering for freedom and fortune like a pauper for his daily bread.

In Maioli are blood and death, Maioli blooms with poppies.  
The poppies are red as blood, with blood blossom the hills and fields.  
Long lines of corpses. In this common place of rest lie  
an Englishman, Frenchman, Italian, Indian, Greek and Pole.

(Those who fell forgot the war and know nothing,  
are lucky not to hear a moaning friend, the crashing of shells,  
Cairo, Mass Albaneta, San Angelo, Monte Cassino – died for them like dreams, as they themselves).

Bridges down, the markerless roads on which we march to Rome burst into rubble,  
smoke and dust choke the nightingale's song and the flowering cherry orchards.

Friend, luckless as I, don't kneel or drop on the road  
even though weariness buckles your legs and the black nights fall.  
We do not need cantatas or hymns, pathos or lies,  
death and life are simple. We could wait no longer,  
our vagabond fate no longer dear. We need another end for night's Pompeii! We came here not to live but die,  
we carry the lava of the war Vesuvius onto tank and gun.

Maioly mirtis ir kraujas, aguonom žydi Maioli.  
Krauju, kaip aguonos raudonu, keistą lakštą istorijai  
rašom  
ir, laisvę sapnuodami, šaukiam: *L i b e r t a v e d i e*  
*m u o r i !*

Viticuso, 1944 gegužės mėn.  
(71–72)

In Maioli are blood and death, Maioli  
blooms with poppies.  
With blood red as poppies we write the strange  
history  
and in our dreams of freedom shout: *L i b e r t a*  
*v e d i e*  
*m u o r i !*  
Viticuso, May 1944  
(71–72)  
Translated by Jonas Zdanys

**This period brings forth a different poetic stylistics which is connected to the pre-war Lithuanian poets from Vilnius and the Polish avant-garde. Kėkštas's lyrics are born in the daily routine of a worker and a soldier, rough, bitter although poetic and metaphysical and is characterised by a choppy avant-garde rhythm and frequent short sentences of expressionism style.**

The third period of Kėkštas's work began when the poet left for Argentina in 1947. For several years he lived on various menial jobs until he finally became an itinerant inspectorate employee supervising road construction. At the same time, together with other émigrés he issued the anthology "Žemė" [Earth], 1951, edited "Literatūros lankai" [Literature Sections], and took an active part in literary life. Kėkštas wrote poetry (the collections "Ramybė man" [Peace with me], 1951, and "Etapai" [Chapters], 1953) and translated, Polish, Belarusian, Italian, Russian and other poets into Lithuanian. This period brought into his works *žemininkai* motifs: existential drama, the search for the meaning of existence on earth, solitude of an emigrant's fate:

#### DIENA NAKTIN

Imk aštrią žvaigždę įkaitusiom akim  
ir padainuok lopšinę mirusiams nakty,  
aukštoj kaip sielvartas,  
kaip juodas Paukščių Takas.

Dienon negrįždamas, priglausk  
kiekvieną pėdą nykstančią – praėjusią –  
priglausk ją meilėj taip,  
kaip glaudi ranką mylimosios prie širdies.

Tuomet tu dieną pamatysi  
už lūžtančių kalnų palinkusią  
žmonių, nuvargintų kančioj –  
ant švintančio pasaulio delno.

Kiekvieną žingsnį savo  
prisiminsi pakeleėj, suklupeš  
prieš aukštą karsto mišką,  
sausą kaip pušis.  
Roma, 1946.I.17  
(84–85)

#### DAY INTO NIGHT

Take a sharp star with your heated eyes  
and sing a lullaby for the night's dead,  
ligh as sorrow  
Like the black Big Dipper.

Not returning to day hold  
each shrinking step  
hold it dearly  
as if pressing a loved one's hand to your heart.

That day you'll see  
bent beyond the fractured hills  
mankind in weary torment –  
on the sparkling world's palm.

You'll remember each of your steps  
by the roadside, kneeling  
before the coffin's high forest,  
dry as a pine.  
Rome, 17.01.1946  
(84–85)  
Translated by Jonas Zdanys

At this time he writes many poems where wartime violence is expressed through phantasmagorical imagery typical to expressionists:

NEGYVOS ŽEMĖS ROMANSAS

Tokios nakties kaip ši  
Dar žemėje nebuvo.

Akys danguj išbarstytos  
kaip gilios, mirusios žvaigždės.  
Ant medžių šakų negyvų  
plasnoja vėjas pašautas,  
supasi sunkiai, nualpsta  
ir tirpsta bežadėj žolėj.

Tokios nakties dar nematė  
šios žemės keleivis.

Kastanjetėmis tarška žvaigždynai  
nužudytos žemės bedugnėmis,  
kur išblyškę lavonų milijonai,  
susirinkę mirties festivalin,  
šoka sulaužytom kojom  
aistringą griaučių bolero,  
skenduolių erotinę sambą.

Tokios nakties dar nelankė  
šioj žemėj paklydęs poetas. (113)

DEAD EARTH'S ROMANCE

There has never before been  
A night like this on earth.

Eyes are scattered in the heavens  
like deep, dead stars.  
The wounded wind flutters  
against the dead branches of trees,  
mute grass rocks heavily, faints,  
and melts.

Earth's travelers have never seen  
another night like this.

Constellations rattle like castanets  
in the murdered earth's depths  
where corpses turn pale  
gathered for death's festival,  
dancing with broken legs  
to an ardent bolero,  
to the erotic samba of the drowned.

The lost poet has never before visited  
a night like this on earth. (113)

Translated by Jonas Zdanys

In 1957 the poet suffered a stroke and was left partially paralyzed; through the great efforts of friends and relatives, in 1959 he returned to Poland and was housed in a home for veterans of the revolutionary movement. As an emigrant, he was not permitted to return to Lithuania. Two events brightened the lot of this homeless man: in 1964 a selected volume of his poetry, "Lyrika" [Lyrics], was published in Vilnius, and in the summer of 1966, Kėkštas travelled to Vilnius, where friends quite literally carried him in their arms. Loneliness and an immense longing for the homeland tormented the poet until the end of his life. In 1966 he wrote to his friend: „Aš apie ilgesį ir skausmą mirtiną kalbu / Kalbu apie neišsipildžiusius sapnus, / Svajones pilną žmogišką gyvenimą gyventi.” [I speak of longing and a mortal pain / I speak of dreams unfulfilled, / Of dreaming a living of complete human life] (Kėkštas, 1986, p. 155). Kėkštas died in 1981 and was buried in Warsaw, though he had dreamed of finding eternal rest in Vilnius's Rasos Cemetery, beside his beloved Emilija Liobytė (Lapinskienė, 2006, p. 93).

**Features of the Musicality of Juozas Kėkštas' Poetry**

Discussing the musicality of poetry, I will use the classification of intermediality by Werner Wolf (Wolf 2009, 2019). In this classification, two main strands can be distinguished. The first is intermediality in the broad sense (I), namely 1) extracompositional intermediality (transmediality, e.g. narrative, archetype) and 2) intermedial transposition (e.g. novel into opera). The second strand (II) is intracompositional intermediality (intermediality in narrow sense). One its branch, plurimediality (1), is devoted to the vocal arts;

the other branch, intermedial reference (2), is divided into two groups: 2.1) explicit reference (music in literature: discussion of music in literature, thematization, etc.); 2.2) implicit reference (individual or system references through forms of heteromedial imitation). Implicit reference is divided into three subgroups: a) evocation (i.e. “graphic” description of a musical composition in a novel); b) formal imitation (structural analogy to music in a novel, to literature in a programme music); c) (partial) reproduction, (i.e. re-preseting quotes from the song text).

Juozas Kėkštas’s personal relationship with music has not yet been researched. What is known is that he studied at Vytautas Magnus Gymnasium in Vilnius, where at the time a renowned music teacher Antanas Krutulys<sup>1</sup> taught. Typically a school employs a single music teacher for all classes; therefore, it is likely that Kėkštas received a basic musical education in accordance with the school curriculum.

Kėkštas’s poetry is not particularly rich in terms of explicit reference (thematization, musical images). Only a few names corresponding to a typical musical genre (“himnas”, “gedulo himnas”, “giesmė”, “cantata”, “simfonijų garsai”, “baladė”, “lopšinė”, “negyvos žemės romansas” [lament anthem, hymn, cantata, sounds of symphonies, ballad, lullaby, romance of the dead land]), terms (“ritmingi banalūs posmai”, “klausyk stataus dienos takto”, “melodijos dvelkimas” [banal rhythmic passages, listen to precipitous beat of the day, the flutter of melody]) or images of the musical scenes (“procesija, vedama orkestro”, “grojančio nerūpestingai melodingą valsą”; “vandenyno balerina”; “šoka sulaužytom kojom” [procession led by an orchestra carelessly playing a melodious waltz; an oceanic ballerina, dancing with broken legs / passionate bolero of a skeleton / erotic samba of the drowned]) can be found in his works. Also, the names of composers (“Wagner, Schubert, Liszt”), the names of musical instruments (“lyra”, “būgnas”, “kastanjetės” [lyre, drum, castanets]), where some are concrete and others symbolic, can be detected in the poet’s works. (Incidentally, all the composers mentioned belong to the era of Romanticism. Richard Wagner is renowned for creating large operatic cycles, exalting Germanic myths, heroic protagonists, the pathos of struggle, and powerful passions, and for a complex system of leitmotifs coupled with a sense of unending continuity. Schubert is famous as a composer of songs and song cycles (about 600 songs), of nine Romantic symphonies, more than thirty-one piano sonatas, and a wide range of chamber music. Liszt is known as the creator of the symphonic poem, of program music and freer synthetic genres, and as an embodiment of the national colour of Hungarian music. Even the use of antonomasia, the pluralized surname form, seems to indicate that the poet was well acquainted with these Romantic composers, abundantly so, and that the Romantic musical style is, for him, almost global and most salient, overshadowing in his mind composers of other musical stylistics. Mentioning of these composers is not accidental, instead, it shows which kind of music is the closest to the poet’s style.

In all Kėkštas’s poetry collections, mostly images of a song, singing or hymn, which stylistic and semantic connotations show an individual dynamics of his worldview, are found, that’s why they are discussed in more detail in this article. In the first collection of poems “Toks gyvenimas” [This Life], the song motif served as an expression of the maximalist oppositions of youth, of sadness, or of struggle (“Jei kartais apie save aš dainuoju, / ir liūdesys eilėraščius virpa – ”[If at times I sing about myself, / and sadness makes the poems tremble– ], 37); “Tuomet / užgiedosime / pergalės / giesmę!” [Then / we shall intone / the hymn / of victory!]), as well as natural motifs: “Žinau, kad soduos paukščiai tau (taip kaip ir man) / linksmy giesmių nebečiulba” [I know that in the orchards the birds for you (as for me) / no longer sing cheerful

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<sup>1</sup> Antanas Krutulys taught at Vilnius Vytautas Magnus Lithuanian Gymnasium from 1919 to 1941 and also taught at the seminary and a primary school. He directed the gymnasium choir and the Lithuanian Students’ Union choir, as well as drama and music clubs, and he sponsored the gymnasium’s student amateur arts group “Milda,” founded in 1919; he organized performances and concerts in Vilnius, Švenčionys, Druskininkai, and elsewhere. He prepared and published “Trumpas muzikos žodynas” [A Concise Dictionary of Music] (1960) and “Muzikinių terminų žodynas” [A Dictionary of Musical Terms] (1975), gathered extensive materials on Lithuanian theatre and music in Vilnius and the Vilnius region (1919–1939), and from 1948 to 1967 taught theoretical disciplines at the Vilnius Juozas Tallat Kelpša Music School.

songs] (“Motinai” [To Mother], 45), and a dramatic or tragic coloring (“Norinčiam laisvę matyti iš arčio / drasko širdį suplėšytos dainos” [For the one who wants to see freedom up close / torn songs rend the heart], 50). The semantics of song in Kėkštas’s poetry would perhaps be best expressed by lines from the programmatic poem “Ramybė man” [Peace with me]:

<p>Aš, vergas nepriklausomos dainos, dainuodamas audras ir laisvą, platų vėją – dainavau save. (113)</p>	<p>I am a slave of independent song, singing storms and the free, wide wind – I sang myself. (113)</p>
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The song becomes a symbol of freedom and existential tragedy (a poem “Žemės tamsai, žvaigždžių lygumoms” [For the Darkness of the Earth, for the Starry Platitudes]).

<p>&lt;...&gt; tegu džiaugsmo mirtis pakelėse vis gilyn ir tolyn, ir platyn –  tegu dainos plaukia ir girdimos būna ne tavo, būk viena ir dainuok &lt;...&gt; (115)</p>	<p>&lt;...&gt; let joy’s death along the roadsides go deeper, farther, wider —  let songs sail on, and let the ones that are heard not be yours, be alone, and sing &lt;...&gt; (115)</p>
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In the poem of the part “Negyvo angelo daina” [Dead Angel’s Song] of collection “Ramybė man” [Peace with me], brighter visions of the song motif also emerge:

<p>JEAN ARTHUR RIMBAUD &lt;...&gt; Palmės, mano palmės, dainuokite lieknos vėjų oazėj! Pirmajai saulei ant smėlio sužvilgus, patiesiu dainų karavaną &lt;...&gt; (120)</p>	<p>JEAN ARTHUR RIMBAUD &lt;...&gt; Palms, my palms, sing standing slender in the oasis of winds! When the first sun beam glints on the sand, I will unfurl a caravan of songs &lt;...&gt; (120)</p>
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In later collections, the song motif becomes still more dramatic, more tragic (“padainuok lopšinę mirusiems nakty” [sing a lullaby for the dead in the night], 84); “krantų neranda išdainuoti savo liūdnei tylai” [I finds no shores to sing out its sorrowful silence], 108); “dainų nerūpestingų nedainavo” [he did not sing carefree songs] // “Į dangų pro širdies griuvėsius / kiparisai augo, raudulingos našlės” [Into the sky through the ruins of the heart / black cypresses grew, wailing widows] // “Pakalnėn plaukė jo rauda, / o vėjas, praūžęs su audra, tyliuos arimuose dingo” [Down into the valley his lament flowed /and the wind, after roaring with the storm, vanished in the silent fields] (105). The semantics of “rauda” (lament<sup>1</sup>) encompasses both weeping and a type of song / hymn that bursts through the “širdies griuvėsius” [“the ruins of the heart”]. The Lithuanian archetypal image of the “tylių arimų” [quiet tilled fields] suggests that certain

<sup>1</sup> “Rauda” (4) 1. weeping; lamentation: “Sulaikydamas raūdą, stovi prie kapo.” [Holding back his lament, he stands by the grave.] | fig.: “Aš girdžiu tavo širdies raūdą.” [I hear the lament of your heart.] 2. a recitative, plaintive composition used in family rites (funerals, weddings). In: <https://ekalba.lt/dabartines-lietuviu-kalbos-zodynas/rauda?paieska=rauda&i=58a5af39-4104-4f58-a079-a6d309a8bb6d>; [accessed 15 June 2025].

elements of a folkloric environment (funerary laments), though he was a city child, were perhaps still familiar to Kėkštas. In poem “Argentinai” [To Argentina] (109) a closely related lament–song motif resounds again: “Mano širdis taip pat laisva ir meilėje bekrastė, / Bet šiandien rauda ji ir kuria dainą” [My heart, too, is free and boundless in love. / But today it laments and composes a song]. However, in one of the final poems “*Nu au soleil noir*” [Naked in the Black Sun] of the collection “Ramybė man” [Peace with me] the contrast between song and lament becomes an existential opposition:

<p>&lt;...&gt; Ugninis sparnas          dainą suplėšė, ir eilių griaučiai          griūva skeveldrom          ant nuogos žemės: šakalu rauda          mirties oazėj!</p> <p>&lt;...&gt;          (122)</p>	<p>&lt;...&gt; A wing of fire          ripped the song, and the verse-bones          fall in splinters          on the naked earth: the laments of jackals          in the oasis of death!</p> <p>&lt;...&gt;          (122)</p>
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Characteristics of both for literature and music song genres (plurimediality) in the poetry of Kėkštas’ are indiscernible: there are no traditional song structures (four-line strophes, couplets, refrain, clearly expressed metrics, rhymes, cadences, etc.), nor the analogues of the typical song (*Lied*) form (ABA<sub>1</sub>). The common genres of music and poetry (sonnet, romance, ballade) are not traditional poetic structures of these genres. In Kėkštas’s poem “Rytų sonetas” [An Oriental Sonnet], “Apeninų baladė” [A Ballad of the Apennines], and “Negyvos žemės romansas” [A Romance of the Dead Land], the traditional poetic structures of these genres are absent.

For example, the form of “Rytų sonetas” (63) is closer to a musical analogue of variations on two themes (formal imitation), while what suggests sonnet-ness would be two quatrain stanzas out of three (one is a quintain) and a closing couplet. “Apeninų baladė” follows not so much the genre of the ballad but rather the Lithuanian war songs, in a certain elementary, square stanzaic structure, with simple rhymes and a “soldierly,” straightforward sentence structure: „Tarp aukštų akmenų gulėjo, / Jam laisvės diena neatėjo“ [He lay among tall stones, / His day of freedom did not come] (70). Three-part compound form analogues (“Toks gyvenimas“ [This Life]), rondality (“Negyvos žemės romansas“ [A Romance of the Dead Land]), etc. are present in Kėkštas’s works. The theme in the most poems is usually developed by the method of free augmentation, which forms the structure of continuous flow.

Kėkštas’s poems have neither evocation of musical works, nor its partial reproduction or his works feature traditionally perceived characteristics of musicality, i.e. syntactic intonational melodics, phonics, metrics. The distant allusions to a vocal song may be the poem’s title, “Violetė” [Violet], and the gracefulness of the text, which recalls the musical delicacy of this a song, and partly the aforementioned folkloric nature of the ballad “Apeninų baladė” [A Ballad of the Apennines].

The constant emphasis on song at the lexical level seems to indicate the emergence of the archetypal song-making force that lies deep within the subconscious (an aspect of transmediality). Transmediality also includes the principles of theme, motif repetition, and variability, which are sometimes expressed in the repetition of rondo elements and variant forms. Various types and aspects of musicality often overlap, complement each other in a poetic work, rarely is there only one aspect of musicality.

From musical style perspective, and as an expression of the period style, certain futurist elements in Kėkštas’s work come close to musical pointillism: “Draugas mirė” [A Friend Has Died] (46), “Ant pečių sunkią naštą užritęs...” [With a Heavy Burden Taken on the Shoulders...] (44), “Sapnas” [Dream] (39), etc., where individual words or short phrases strike like spaced chords in sonic space. The expressionist drive of text “Negyvo angelo daina” [The Song of the Dead Angel] (123), and some others approaches the concentrated extremity of hopelessness characteristic of atonal serial music, at times shading into psychedelic imagery.

## Generalization

1. In Lithuania, emigration began in the 17th c., but it reached its greatest scale after WWII, when a third of Lithuania's inhabitants left the country, became war refugees, or were deported by the Soviets to Siberia, imprisoned or sent to concentration camps. About 70 percent of writers and other figures of culture left Lithuania to escape Soviet persecution and repression.

2. The biography of the Lithuanian poet Juozas Kėkštas (1915–1981, birth name Adomavičius) is exceptional from the standpoints of both emigration and creative work. In youth he was captivated by communist ideals, though later he became disillusioned with them. For underground communist activity under Polish occupation in Vilnius region Kėkštas was imprisoned three times, and later by Soviet he was sent to a concentration camp. The poet fought with the Polish army against the fascists, from 1945 he resided in Rome, in Argentina, in Poland. He published several collections of poetry and actively worked in the cultural press of Lithuanian emigrants. Kėkštas ended his life in Warsaw because emigrants during Soviet occupation could not return to their homeland.

3. In Kėkštas's works it is possible to identify features of a Lithuanian rebellious expressionism, of avant-garde poetics in most of Vilnius period writings; and in literature created in exile—existentialism, as well as the *žemininkai* worldview. Among the principal thematic aspects uniting all periods of his work are an uncompromising commitment to the struggle for freedom, tormenting solitude, and compassion for the suffering.

4. Musical elements (thematization)—surprisingly numerous and varied in Kėkštas's work—shape together the poetics of the pathos of freedom and the dramaturgy of existential despair. Particularly frequent are the images of song and lament, which constitute a kind of essential dividing line between the oppositions of hope and dramatism. In addition to these, we find images of the hymn, ballad, cantata, romance, symphony, hymn [giesmė], waltz, melody, measure, bolero, and others, as well as the surnames of composers emblematic of Romantic pathos.

5. Characteristics of both for literature and music song genres (plurimediality) in the poetry of Kėkštas' are indiscernible: there are no traditional song structures (four-line strophes, couplets, refrain, clearly expressed metrics, rhymes, cadences, etc.), nor the analogues of the typical song (*Lied*) form (ABA<sub>1</sub>) or the other genres (sonnet, romance, ballade).

6. Regarding the formal imitation, two-theme variations ("Rytų sonetas" [An Oriental Sonnet]), three-part compound form analogues ("Toks gyvenimas" [This Life]), rondality ("Negyvos žemės romansas" [A Romance of the Dead Land]) are present in Kėkštas's work. The theme in the most poems is usually developed by the method of free augmentation, which forms the structure of continuous flow.

7. The distant allusions to a vocal song (evocation) may be the poem's title, "Violetė" [Violet], the gracefulness of the text, which recalls the musical delicacy of this a song, and partly the aforementioned folkloric nature of the ballad "Apeninų baladė" [A Ballad of the Apennines].

8. The constant emphasis on song at the lexical level seems to indicate the emergence of the archetypal *song-making force that lies deep within the subconscious* (an aspect of transmediality). Various types and aspects of musicality often overlap, complement each other in a poetic work, rarely is there only one aspect of musicality.

9. From musical style perspective, and as an expression of the period style, certain futurist elements in Kėkštas's work come close to musical pointillism: "Draugas mirė" [A Friend Has Died], "Ant pečių sunkią naštą užritęs..." [With a Heavy Burden Taken on the Shoulders...], "Sapnas" [Dream], etc., where individual words or short phrases strike like spaced chords in sonic space. The expressionist drive of text "Negyvo angelo daina" [Dead Angel's Song], "Negyvos žemės romansas" [A Romance of the Dead Land]), and others approaches the concentrated extremity of hopelessness characteristic of atonal serial music, at times shading into psychedelic imagery.

10. The musical elements in Kėkštas's work, especially the pathos of a war song and hymn, are close to an archetypal Lithuanian worldview, in which song served to express both the existential beauty of being and human sorrow, nostalgic images of solitude and the pathos of the struggle for freedom.

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