

Charlatanism in Latvian Literature of the 1970s

Šarlatanizmas XX a. 8-o dešimtmečio latvių literatūroje

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Abstract: The article explores charlatanism in the works of two Latvian authors, Marģeris Zariņš's novel *Viltotais Fausts* (*Mock Faustus*, 1973) and Miervaldis Birze's play *Bišentropa balzams* (*Bišentrops' Balm*, 1970). Considering the Soviet emphasis on scientific method, progressivism, rationalism, and atheism, the attitudes of the time towards charlatanism can be best described as disdainful. It was regarded as something laughable, often introduced in veiled forms. By employing charlatanism, the writers made the above-mentioned works more credible—or at least more fascinating and playful—allowing those in power to draw a sharp contrast between the foolishness that charlatanism represented and the great Soviet advances in medicine. These dubious practices were often embraced, reflecting a gap between ideological belief and practical reality. However, the rise of so-called Soviet spirituality also signified a broader shift—from the suppression of religion to a renewed pursuit of spiritual exploration in the USSR.

Birze and Zariņš freely navigate several cultural and linguistic strata and folk motifs. They are interested in the mystical, occultism, and the scientifically inexplicable. The works of both authors on charlatanism can be seen as mere instances within the broader, yet episodic, presence of charlatanism in Latvian literature. At the same time, they represent a kind of culmination within the writers' legacies, especially in Zariņš's case.

Keywords: Soviet Latvian literature, charlatanism, deception, Marģeris Zariņš, Miervaldis Birze.

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Santrauka: Straipsnyje nagrinėjama šarlatanizmo tema dviejų latvių autorių kūrinuose – Margerio Zarinio romane *Netikras Faustas* (1973) ir Miervaldžio Birzės pjesėje *Bišentropo balzamas* (1970). Sovietų režimas propagavo progresyvizmą, racionalizmą ir ateizmą, todėl tos epochos požiūri į šarlatanizmą galima apibūdinti kaip paniekinamą. Tai laikyta nelegalia veikla. Šarlatanizmo tema aptariamiems kūriniams teikė įtaigumo ir žaismingumo, o režimas pasinaudojo šiais kūriniiais išskeldamas reikšmingus sovietų pasiekimus medicinoje. Taikstymasis su šia abejotina praktika atvėrė atotrūkį tarp ideologinių lozungų ir realybės; vadinamojo sovietinio dvasingumo fenomenas SSRS simbolizavo kur kas reikšmingesnį poslinkį – ilgainiui nustota slopinti religinių bendruomenių veiklą ir pradėta ieškoti naujų dvasingumo apraiškų. Biržę ir Zarinį domina mistika, okultizmas ir moksliai nepaaiškinami reiškiniai, jie laviruoja tarp kelių kultūrinių ir kalbos sluoksnių, folkloro motyvų. Aptariami šių autorių kūriniai vertinami kaip atskiri platesnės (sykiu ir epizodinės) šarlatanizmo temos pavyzdžiai Latvijos literatūroje, žymintys ir rašytojų literatūrinės kūrybos kulminaciją, ypač Zarinio atveju.

Raktažodžiai: latvių literatūra sovietmečiu, šarlatanizmas, apgaulė, Margeris Zarinis, Miervaldis Birzė.

The Echoes of Charlatanism

In a broader sense, charlatanism refers to deliberate misrepresentation of one's expertise, typically with the intent to deceive others. In a narrower context, it often applies to individuals, such as unlicensed practitioners, who falsely claim professional authority in the field of medicine. Belgian philosopher and chemist Isabelle Stengers notes that the chief difference between a charlatan and a doctor is the fact that the former refuses to consider or even ignores the consequences of their actions. The charlatan is more confident than a doctor and presents their medicine or healing techniques as unquestionable, although they are comparable to a placebo (Stengers 2003: 15, 34). Nevertheless, caution should be exercised when making use of this characterization, since calling someone a charlatan might also be considered a form of slander, which may affect people's reputation and career.

Charlatans are also present in literature. For example, in his works, such as *Le Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur* (*Tartuffe, or The Impostor, or The Hypocrite*, 1664), *Le Médecin malgré lui* (*The Doctor in Spite of Himself*, 1666) or *Le Malade imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Invalid*, 1673), Molière employs unlearned doctors (or impostors in general). His characters quote Latin aphorisms to impress the patients and their relatives, and they regard bloodletting as nearly the sole therapeutic

method. Molière implies that the doctors of the seventeenth century do not differ much from charlatans.

To return closer in time to the literary works under consideration, Marģeris Zariņš's *Viltotais Fausts* (*Mock Faustus*, 1973) and Miervaldis Birze's *Bišentropa balzams* (*Bišentrops' Balm*, 1970), the 1966 brochure *Brīnumdari* (*Miracle Workers*) by Kārlis Arons is noteworthy. The candidate of Medical Sciences compiled a list of various treatment methods associated with the Church, such as quackery, religious rituals, and miraculous springs. Although the intended audience of Arons's work is not entirely clear, the author of the brochure condemns religious fanaticism and narrow-mindedness, which cause people to harm themselves. As the author notes in his didactic foreword, "only a language of pure facts and a sincere and stern conversation with people will allow us to fully eliminate the misfortunes related to superstitious thinking and ignorance" (Arons 1966: 5). The author, in a language typical of the Soviet era, encourages people to mobilize all means to combat superstitions. Charlatanism can be seen as a manifestation of inability to effectively address the challenges of the present situation.

I will examine the works of Zariņš and Birze using the approaches of comparative literature, medical humanities, and narrative medicine (the latter two consider charlatanism a serious, even unforgivable breach of ethics).¹ Some brief references to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe will be unavoidable. Medical humanities describe certain aspects of the activity of charlatans, whereas narrative medicine is more likely to narrate the stories of the patients who have encountered a charlatan. Birze and Zariņš, however, seem far more intrigued by the charlatan's flamboyant personality and performative actions. The article investigates the working environment of the charlatans in Zariņš's and Birze's works, their methods of operation, personality traits, and whether they are successful at what they do. Both authors' interest in exploring these themes and forms of expression likely stemmed from an implicit and growing dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed by socialist realism in literature. Beginning in the 1970s, Birze went so far as to speak of a "literature of limited truth" (Auzāne 2024: 80–91).

1 Previous research has addressed various aspects of Zariņš's works. In 2021, Mārtiņš Laizāns researched gastropoetics in Zariņš's novel (it is accessible on the Internet: <https://dom.lndb.lv/data/obj/894645.html>). Lita Silova analyzed the script for a potential film ("tragicomedy") *Mock Faustus: Two Ways to Falsify Faustus: A Novel and a Script* ("Viltotais Fausts": Divi varianti, kā viltot Faustu—romāns un kinoscenārijs). *Searchings and Findings (Meklējumi un atradumi)*. Rīga: Zinātne, 2005, p. 103–111.

Titles as a Web of Meanings

Today, literary critics argue that the very title of Zariņš's novel, *Viltotais Fausts jeb pārļabota un papildināta pavārgrāmata* (*Mock Faustus, or The Corrected Complemented Cooking-Book*), strongly suggests the desire to create a hybrid genre, a "metaliterature" (Berelis 2001: 36 and further pages), a game of sorts. While cookbooks do not traditionally belong to so-called high or intellectual literature, Zariņš's novel creates other intertextual links—not only with Goethe's works, but also with the semi-culinary work by Laima Muktupāvela, *Šampinjonu derība* (*The Mushroom Covenant*, 2002), where the biographies of migrant workers are interspersed with mushroom recipes. According to Jānis Liepiņš, Zariņš was interested in every genre in existence, except for the tedious ones (Liepiņš 2010: 5). His passion was reflected in the novel, which was not understood by the critics of the time and was even called "a boisterous cacophony" (the literal translation from Latvian: a cat concert) (Gaižūns [Gaižiūnas] 1985: 16).²

Zariņš's reference to *mock* Faustus in the title of the book can be interpreted much in the same way we regard inaccurately titled recipes in cooking. The most obvious example is meatloaf (the literal translation from Latvian and other languages: false rabbit). The main character of the book, Jānis Vridriķis Trampedahs, a pharmacist who awards himself a Master's degree for his extensive knowledge of German culture, belongs to the same paradigm of *ersatz* or substitute goods, such as chicory and acorn coffee instead of coffee made from coffee beans, margarine instead of butter, and so on. *Mock* Faustus also refers to an artificial or suspicious person (a charlatan), just like in folklore and literature, where the devil is betrayed by the sudden appearance of a disguised goat or horse's leg. There is also an example of the alienated Faustus, whom we encounter in the title of the book *Virtuālais Fausts* (*Virtual Faustus*, 2008) by Jānis Rokpelnis, where the main character is a computer addict. Although Zariņš was often lauded for his stylistic experimentations in literature, his works were also criticized for not engaging sufficiently with the political and social themes of the Soviet era. They were often considered anachronistic, disconnected, and

2 A statement by Marta Rudzīte. As Gaižūns [Gaižiūnas] rightly points out, a similar reaction was once also provoked by the translation of *Faust* by Rainis, and Zariņš had to merge "the highest and the lowest linguistic registers, and just like the alchemist to obtain pure gold (spirituality) from impure metal" (Gaižūns [Gaižiūnas] 1985: 16).

more aligned with the interwar literary tradition. In contrast, Zariņš's musical compositions were more closely integrated into Soviet cultural life.

Birze exhibited a greater conformity to the expectations of the Soviet literary scene. A member of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union since 1956, Birze's involvement contrasted with that of Zariņš, who joined the Union only in 1972. Birze's play *Bišentrops' Balm*, performed on the stage of the Cēsis Folk Theatre in 1971, came as a surprise, as it did not correspond to the style for which Birze was generally known. The title suggests that the main character, also a pharmacist, has invented a balm and patented it under his name. The balm (or balsam) is both a remedy and an alcoholic drink, it also calls to mind expressions such as "a balm for the soul" or "the elixir of life," i.e., something that encourages a person and, at the same time, evokes alchemy experiments. In Zariņš's novel, republished in 2015, the minstrel Kristofers Mārlovs creates the "universal" elixir of life (Zariņš 2015: 57). Yet the narrative takes a dark turn when Trampedahs invents not a healing substance but its opposite—a destructive extermination agent that contains a discreet hint at Zyklon B. It could be argued that when writing the novel, Zariņš deliberately included this reference, which was particularly convenient for Soviet rhetoric.

Illness, Knowledge, and the Experimentation: The Typical Charlatans' Experience

Magic, the occult, alchemy, and similar practices, which often go hand-in-hand with deceit, pervade Goethe's *Faust* (1790), Zariņš's *Mock Faustus* (especially the first part of the novel), and a few of Birze's stories, as well as his play *Bišentrops' Balm*. In Goethe's play, the elements of charlatanism and mysticism appear in the transformation of the poodle, in the signing of an agreement with a drop of blood, and in the use of the soporific drink that Faust offers to Margarete's mother in order to visit the young woman in secret, which eventually kills the mother (Goethe 1808: line 3510). In Zariņš's novel, occultism is also present. Researcher Lita Silova calls virtually all his characters "bewitched"/"captivated"/"mesmerized" (Silova 1996: 104), and this characterization applies to Trampedahs, Mārlovs, the maid Kerolaine, as well as the poet Margarēta Šella, the counterpart of Goethe's Margarete.

As it was already mentioned, Zariņš was a writer and a composer. He did not have much exposure to medicine, but it is known that as a young man he was afflicted with tuberculosis, a disease for which effective medicine had not yet been developed. Zariņš had reportedly been successfully operated on by his brother (Znotiņš 2020: 67). Birze, who was not only a writer but a doctor, was also afflicted with tuberculosis throughout all his life. At times, Birze reported on quack “doctors,” but the physicians depicted in his works sometimes transgressed professional boundaries too. In the stories, partially documental in nature, he wrote about the physicians accepting thank-you gifts (Birze 2012: 37) or that in the countryside, due to the shortage of qualified professionals, they sometimes had to perform the tasks of veterinarians (Birze 1961: 135). Even real doctors, by definition the opposite of charlatans, often made ethically dubious decisions in Birze’s writings.

It is obvious that the common denominator in the texts by Goethe, Zariņš, and Birze is a scholar who, because of his education, stands out as more sophisticated than his clientele or the common people he encounters. This “erudite” has been a common phenomenon in literature since the Renaissance, but this type of personality especially flourished during the Age of Enlightenment. Furthermore, in Zariņš’s and Birze’s works, and especially in Goethe’s play, erudition is associated with freethinking. Since during Goethe’s time the traditional division of universities into four faculties (arts, law, medicine, and theology) was still present, a scholar to Goethe is a person who has studied all four disciplines. However, in Goethe’s play, Faust is bewildered, and his head is spinning, which might have served as an incentive to try out charlatanism, palmistry, and alchemy: “I’ve studied now Philosophy / And Jurisprudence, Medicine, – / And even, alas! Theology, / From end to end, with labor keen; / And here, poor fool! with all my lore / I stand, no wiser than before” (Goethe 1808: line 354–359). The encounter between Faust, who craves for new experiences, and Mephistopheles serves as proof of an interest in the human condition and a willingness to overcome the limits of human knowledge. As Koen Vermeir, a scholar of the history and philosophy of science, observes, charlatans and similar figures often challenge epistemic boundaries and act as multivalent agents (Vermeir 2022: 363–384)—a dynamic that resonates with Faust’s own restless drive to transcend the limits of available knowledge.

Invented Cures and Sold Souls: Charlatanism and Identity

Two charlatans appear in Zariņš's and Birze's works: the Magister Trampedahs (the counterpart of Faust) and Bišentrops, respectively³. In Zariņš's novel, set between 1930 and 1945, the pharmacist Trampedahs, who has granted himself a degree, has two enemies, Aivars Džonsons, a doctor from the Cēsis County, and his assistant, Bonifācijs Ivbulis. Both have uncovered Trampedahs's trickery and are trying to intimidate him into leaving his practice. Ultimately, it becomes clear that their actions are driven by the rivalry that Trampedahs represents. The Magister has been forced to move to a small town near the river Venta, but he suffers from persecutory beliefs, namely, that Džonsons is following him and trying to coax out recipes from his cookbook, which contains lessons on table manners, recipes, health advice, etc., and is referred to as a "philosophically gastronomic treatise, a dissertation by a candidate in culinary and dietary medicine, served in a sauce of the morals and virtues of the century, with a side of emotions" (Zariņš 2015: 22). Drawn to the ethnic roots and archaic elements of language that this particular form of writing uniquely conveys, Mārlovs, the narrator of the story and the embodiment of a Mephistophelean figure, approaches the Magister with a proposal to revise the cookbook (*Ibid.*: 56).

Trampedahs makes his meals in his laboratory, just like in the witches' kitchen described in Goethe's *Faust*, using ordinances as well as exotic, hard-to-find ingredients⁴. All the ingredients for Trampedahs's dishes are ordered from abroad or come from trusted farmers. They are then weighed, ripened, and so on. For example, Trampedahs orders his maid to make him a partridge pâté in cheese, served in seashells that had been collected in the Balearic Islands shortly before a typhoon. (*Ibid.*: 27) The eclectic recipes are rarely linked to Trampedahs's national identity; instead, they signal a mixture of cuisines and are as unstable as the identity of the Magister, who sometimes refers to himself as German (or *Reichsdeutscher*), at other times as Latvian, occasionally as

3 In Zariņš's novel, albeit to a lesser extent, another charlatan, Mārlovs, the counterpart of Mephistopheles, figures. By using the advice found in an Indonesian treatise, he seeks to create the elixir of life from rice malt syrup.

4 It is worth noting that during the interwar period in Latvia, some wealthy people's tables abounded in food. The material conditions were in sharp contrast with the occupation that followed, when rationing was introduced and "under the counter" transactions became common.

Lithuanian, and always—as a culinary romantic (*Ibid.*: 115)⁵. In the end, it turns out that he had not even invented the recipes himself, but rather “borrowed” them from an earlier, centuries-old publication by Hamann and Steffenhagen (*Ibid.*: 302).

The pharmacist skillfully erases the borders between different disciplines and creates the impression that he has no time to rest—he is always busy at work and at home, preparing or supervising one thing or another. This tirelessness and blind busyness bring him closer, repeatedly, to the diabolical. In his life like in a crucible, literature, music, chemistry and alchemy, good etiquette and the cultivation of herbs (useful both for making dishes and for curing people), are all melted together. The recipes often include homophonic wordplay, such as the dish titled “Zustrenes and Zaratustra” (a pun that combines the Latvian word *zustrenes* (berries) and *Zaratustra*, referencing Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1892)). The dish is actually lamb ham with blackcurrants. However, the reader may note that the final recipe is connected to an implicit reference glorifying the Soviets, where soldiers serve the “hearty Caucasian soup *kharcho*” as a promise for the future (*Ibid.*: 301). The literary critic Guntis Berelis considers this “formulaic happy ending” a parody of socialist realism literature (Berelis 1999: 230), but it remains unclear whether Zariņš did this proactively or as a response to Soviet censorship.

Trampedahs is portrayed as a socially isolated person who is also detached from reality in other ways. Trampedahs is affluent, so he suggests that the labourers, whose children have been afflicted with consumption, should send the young ones to Davos to benefit from the mountain air. The poor man responds pragmatically—the offspring can work as herders and profit from the fresh air in that way (Zariņš 2015: 64). The racist Aryan (“the German spirit”) and Darwinist undertones, quite common during the Nazi occupation of Latvia and before it, resound in the novel, since Trampedahs silently speculates that consumption is a social disease and that the weak must die (*Ibid.*). Trampedahs’s belief reveals his ignorance, as he fails to see that the very conditions he dismisses, such as poverty, malnutrition, and poor sanitation, are pressing realities that continue to drive illness and inequality. The worst manifestations of the German spirit are also reflected in the way the

5 In Zariņš’s novel, Margarēta is repeatedly and incorrectly depicted as Polish. The maid comes from England, but her daughter is married into a Scottish family. Furthermore, the maid Kerolaine is portrayed as a woman with witch-like qualities (*Ibid.*: 58, 25).

pharmacist rubs shoulders with Hitlerites, whom he accommodates in various ways, until he has, as he puts it, converted to the Germanic faith (*Ibid.*: 85).

Trampedahs also engages in other dubious practices, for instance, a little girl's condition worsens after taking a mysterious powder offered to her by the Magister. In another storyline, the pharmacist (who never forgets to collect a considerable sum of money from his patients) seemingly helps a woman give birth to a son, as she has only ever had daughters and recently gave birth to her eleventh. The woman does indeed bear an heir, but even Trampedahs is awed by this fact, and it can be inferred that the birth of the boy was merely a fortunate coincidence. Even though the pharmacist's undeniable charisma masks his practices, his cynicism and ineptitude ultimately endanger those around him, particularly as he exploits the vulnerability of less educated and poorer individuals.

Mārlovs offers a canonical deal to Trampedahs: He will revive his youth and introduce him to the "sweet life" (*Ibid.*: 58)⁶; in return, Trampedahs will provide him with the copyright on the cookbook and a chance to revise it. Mārlovs's persistence eventually breaks Trampedahs's resistance, and although the Magister can sense Mārlovs's diabolical nature, for instance, he has noticed that Mārlovs can read the dreams of other people and is afraid of the cross, he persuades himself that, at least in Latvian folklore, the devil is easily fooled (*Ibid.*: 46, 69, 60), and thus poses no real danger.

Mārlovs prepares medicine from hartshorn's salt, thistle oil, cucumber juice, grasshoppers, mastic, rosewater, and other substances and compounds that will make the pharmacist look (but not actually be) younger. Although Margarēta, being very observant, notices that her seemingly young husband Trampedahs has an old man's manner of speaking and that he always applies ointments, swallows dried flies, etc., she refrains from asking questions, as Trampedahs is wealthy and influential, and she does not wish to burden herself (*Ibid.*: 179).

Similar metamorphoses (rejuvenation) can also be found in Goethe's and Birze's works, as they deal with the change from the state of physical breakdown to blooming youth, and with the lost soul as the result of an agreement⁷.

6 It is assumed that Zariņš was alluding to Federico Fellini's movie of the same name, *La Dolce Vita* (The Good [or the Sweet] Life), which had already been released in 1960.

7 Nowadays, aging is studied as a separate discipline, gerontology. A captivating example can be found in Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig*, in which the main character, a prototype of the composer Gustav Mahler, dyes his hair, tints his eyelashes, and colours his cheeks red to seduce a young boy (Mann 1919: 136).

An important motif of both Western and Eastern cultures is at play here: Respect for elders has largely remained in the East—rooted in traditions such as Confucianism, while in the West, the rise of popular culture and mass media during the twentieth century has resulted in a cult of youth celebrating vitality. This motif can also be seen in Goethe’s *Faust*, where Faust desires to become younger and conquer the hearts of women he has not previously talked to, or who have been inaccessible to him. However, the youth offers no substantial benefits. At the end of Zariņš’s novel, Trampedahs chooses to take the mortal dose of medicine, thus becoming the victim of his own invention. The dramatic ending once again evokes the elite of Nazi Germany, for instance, Joseph Goebbels’ family, who died by taking cyanide capsules crushed between their teeth.

Doctors and patients frequently take center stage next to Birze’s characters and protagonists; however, in Birze’s play *Bišentrops’ Balm*, the main character is a pharmacist whose story can be followed across several decades—from 1902 until the 1960s. The writer had already used the character of Bišentrops in his two previous stories: “Dakteris Bišentrops” (“The Doctor Bišentrops,” 1958) and “Pa kāda apgāzuma pēdām” (“Dissecting a Counterargument,” 1962). The stories were apparently written in preparation for the voluminous play. In the stories, we discover additional information about charlatan Bišentrops. He is not just a pharmacy assistant but also a self-declared psychotherapist and a psychologist who practices hypnosis. Bišentrops also holds a societal position and moral authority, as it is common in rural areas with few residents, aligning with the Soviet ideal of the intelligentsia as energetic and influential leaders responsible for educating the masses and engaging them in events, such as lectures on health and other community initiatives that promote state ideals.

The play in three acts (set in 1902, 1940, and 1968, respectively) opens with the introduction of the pharmacy assistant Bišentrops. Much like Zariņš’s Trampedahs, Bišentrops is a resourceful yet self-serving individual. His manner of speaking to the “commoners” is unrefined, even vulgar, while he prefers to speak German to the elite of the society. The owner of the pharmacy orders him to find ways to increase revenue, and over the course of the play, Bišentrops comes up with a scheme to marry the wife of the owner and thus acquire the pharmacy. He is portrayed as an adventurer who, during the interwar period or even before, spent considerably long periods of his life in Hungary, Romania, and Africa, studied in Constantinople and Dorpat (the historical name of Tartu),

yet cannot present any documents certifying his education, or claims to have lost them during the war⁸. However, the absence of verifiable credentials is of little consequence, as the charlatan often operates between scholarly and mainstream domains, utilizing both soft and semi-hard skills.

The devil, surrounded by bluish-green and red flames, appears in the pharmacy in the midst of major historical collisions. Under his influence, Bišentrops creates a balm that consists of cattle medicine, bile, Spanish flies, nightshade, bitter orange, and other ingredients (Birze 1970: 105). With this balm, Bišentrops “treats” the gluttony of a woman who is portrayed as a member of a bourgeois society, as well as problems of an erotic nature, hair loss, and other ailments. During the German occupation, the pharmacist claims that the balm has originated in Germany, whereas on other occasions, he claims that it has been developed in Switzerland or Sweden. During the authoritarian Kārlis Ulmanis’s rule, he advertises it as a Latvian product made from birch buds, juniper berries, muskrat root, and rye grain. In both Birze’s and Zariņš’s works, the charlatans frequently change their personal traits, demonstrating adaptability and opportunism.

The sycophant Bišentrops also changes his name. At times, he adopts the German name Jakob or the Latvianized Jēkabs (Bišentrops claims that his surname derives from the Latvian word for beehive or *bišu strops*), while at other times, he uses the Slavic Yakov. Under the German occupation, Bišentrops even muses that “no intelligent person born in the territory of Latvia is of Latvian descent” (*Ibid.*: 79), but during Ulmanis’s rule, he claims the opposite. In Constantinople, he was a Mohammedan, in Latvia—a Lutheran, and during Soviet times, an atheist. Sometimes he reads the Latvian newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas* (*The Latest News*), and at other times, the Soviet *Истина* (*Truth*).

This chameleonic change of identities, which occurs concurrently with the change in political circumstances, is the essential feature of the charlatan’s

8 The scene and the above-mentioned universities also appear in Birze’s stories (Heidelberg is also mentioned). Miervaldis Birze, “The Doctor Bišentrops” (“Dakteris Bišentrops”) in the journal *Health* (*Veselība*), No. 1, June 1, 1958, 30, Miervaldis Birze, “Dissecting a Counter-argument” (“Pa kāda apgāzuma pēdām”) in the book *Quid stas, transit hora!* Rīga: Medicīnas apgāds, 2012, 168–169. In the first story, Bišentrops is depicted as an advocate of Soviet progressivism. He is the only one in the region to have an X-ray machine and radioactive peat mud. It is later revealed that the machine is built from an old bicycle frame, and the powders are made from potato starch. Tellingly, Bišentrops does not write prescriptions, thereby forcing his patients to rely solely on verbal claims.

nature. However, as Bišentrops, who is now the consultant pharmacist, notes with a hint of irony, in the 1960s he is just as wealthy (i.e., poor) as in 1902, so there is no valid basis for the accusations by a certain committee and physicians that he has built his wealth on the backs of others. The pharmacy and the balm are expropriated by the state, and the promises are made that the story of the balm will be reported in a dissertation (*Ibid.*: 103). Nevertheless, Bišentrops, who enters a dream-like state during the appearance of the devil, pleads to be awakened in 2000, making a futurological claim that his services will be necessary, as people will still want to believe in something romantic and supernatural (*Ibid.*: 106). Although Bišentrops no longer owns the pharmacy, and he does not manage to obtain the title of an Honoured Science Worker along with a hefty pension in exchange for the recipe of the balm, at the end of Birze's work, the reader hears a hopeful note on the charlatan's potential.

Conclusion

Influenced by Soviet atheism and the emphasis on science, the depiction of charlatanism, even when delivered in a disparaging way, showcased Zariņš's and Birze's erudition and their knowledge of various linguistic strata. This stood in stark contrast to the monotonous nature of socialist realism, which glorified heroic figures and lacked the layers of depth needed to explore individual flaws and contradictions. The characters, however, are deeply influenced by historical context. Zariņš's characters enjoy a greater sense of freedom, whereas Birze does not even depict them in the interwar period, likely reflecting a political climate that discouraged engagement with that particular time. Just as Birze avoided certain historical moments during his lifetime, the reluctance to confront sensitive topics had continued to shape the reception of his legacy after his death in 2000. Although a collection of Birze's short stories was published in 2012, his literary heritage has faded from public and academic view—suggesting a greater openness toward writers like Zariņš, whose works still attract scholarly attention and remain part of the literary curriculum.

In real life, physicians are considered to belong to a moral community (Pellegrino 1990: 221–232), from which charlatans are excluded. Viewed through the lens of narrative medicine, the experiences of patients treated

by charlatans illustrate how readily individuals accept persuasive rhetoric, a phenomenon grounded in the longstanding cultural belief in the therapeutic and healing power of speech. Furthermore, the patients are somewhat at fault, showing little interest in the qualifications of the person treating them and instead choosing to rely on the experiences and words of their acquaintances. This reflects the broader societal issue in which intimate health concerns were often subordinated to one's active role in the collective. Both Zariņš's and Birze's charlatans are vital, full of energy, which differentiates them from Goethe's Faust, who contemplates dying by his own hand as early as the beginning of the play. In the works of Latvian authors, charlatans seek profit rather than healing, avoid investigating diseases, evade responsibility, and maintain their reputation by instilling fear or shame in others or by charging high fees. Despite this, they undeniably serve as the vibrant element of the narrative, driving much of the action and thematic development.

The works are interconnected through their eclectic nature and the merging of various spheres of activity across different epochs. This amalgamation of circumstances involves changes in surnames and consequently, identities, motivated by political reasons. Even though Birze seemed to prefer the linear narrative and focused on medical topics, his works do not include as many cultural references (apart from the character of the devil). Zariņš's works have the additional culinary layer, which is absent in Birze's works. The two texts were written shortly after one another, reflecting a common cultural climate regarding the mythical in Soviet Latvian prose.

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