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**LITERARY CANON FORMATION
AS NATION-BUILDING IN CENTRAL
EUROPE AND THE BALTICS. 19TH TO
EARLY 20TH CENTURY, ED. BY AISTĖ
KUČINSKIENĖ, VIKTORIJA ŠEINA,
AND BRIGITA SPEIČYTĖ, LEIDEN -
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The volume's aim, which consists of articles by 17 researchers from, among others, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Slovakia,¹ is to show the correlation between nation-building processes and the formation of literary canons in the long nineteenth century. As the authors emphasise, this phenomenon was closely related to the reception of Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of the nation in the universities and academies of science of Central and Eastern Europe. The scholars in their midst, wishing to forge links with 'their' nations, made efforts to codify national languages and to create (often from scratch) literary canons treated as the basic carrier of national values.

* Revised and supplemented version of the paper Review of the collective work 'Literary canon formation as nation-building in Central Europe and the Baltics, 19th to early 20th century', ed. by Aistė Kučinskienė, Viktorija Šeina, and Brigita Speičytė, Leiden - Boston 2021 delivered on 7 May 2024 at the National Library Open Seminar.

1 Viktorija Šeina, Helena Markowska-Fulara, Brigita Speičytė, Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn, Jurga Sadauskienė, Krystyna Zabawa, Jagoda Wierzejska, Olga Bartosiewicz-Nikolaev, Judit Dobry, Gergely Fórizs, Katre Kikas, Anna R. Burzyńska, Paweł Bukowiec, Vaidas Šeferis, Aistė Kučinskienė, Ramunė Bleizgienė, Renata Beličová.

The work makes it possible, on the one hand, to draw attention to the phenomenon of the gradual ‘nationalisation’ of literature, i.e. its recognition as a basic tool of nation-building, and, on the other hand, to show the role of the intelligentsia itself in the task of disseminating ‘national’ literature among the people’s strata.

The most important sources of inspiration here are three treatises to which I would like to devote some attention. The first is Anthony Smith’s book *The Cultural Basis of Nations*.² The British sociologist defined a nation as a ‘self-defined human community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols, conditions and traditions, [...] and observe common customs and universally accepted laws’. All these elements passed down from generation to generation within the symbolic communities thus defined comprised, in his view, national identity. For Smith, the nation had primarily a cultural dimension. As such, it had to be based on a consensus between the preservation of old sacralised traditions and the introduction of changes necessary for the survival of the community.³ Along with emphasising the importance of intergenerational ties for the formation of the foundations of national identity, Smith agreed with Benedict Anderson – author of the concept of imagined communities⁴ – that nationalism was a modern socio-political movement. In doing so, he assumed that it did not arise ‘out of thin air’ as the end product of the economic and social transformations taking place in Europe from the late 18th century onwards but stood for the formative role of earlier, pre-modern ethnic and religious symbols and imaginaries. The second work is Miroslav

2 A. D. Smith, *Kulturowe podstawy narodów: hierarchia, przymierze i republika*, trans. W. Usakiewicz, Krakow 2009 (orig. *The cultural foundations of nations*, Oxford 2008).

3 Ibid, pp. 36-37, M. Wódka, *Naród według A. D. Smitha i jego znaczenie dla katolickiej nauki społecznej*, ‘Rozprawy Społeczne’ 2020, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 3-5 - <https://rozprawy Społeczne.edu.pl/pdf-119123-51403?filename=Narod%20w%20rozumieniu%20A.D..pdf> [accessed 24.05.2024].

4 B. Anderson, *Wspólnoty wyobrażone: rozważania o źródłach i rozprzestrzenianiu się nacjonalizmu*, trans. S. Amsterdamski, Krakow 1997 (orig. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London – New York 1983).

Hroch's book *Malé národy Evropy* (2003) (*Small Nations of Europe*).⁵ The main merit of the Czech historian was to undermine the dualism of the genesis of nations, which would be divided into 'political nations' and 'ethnic nations'. Such a simplistic division failed to consider that every national movement used cultural arguments, which primarily included the national language and (real or invented) collective memory. In this respect, every nationalism was both 'political' (civic and territorial) and culturally-ethnic and, therefore, appealing both to the myth of common descent and the historical community of destiny. Another book systematically referred to here is *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) (*The World Republic of Literature*).⁶ Its author, Pascale Casanova, introduced the 'Herderian revolution' concept into scholarly circulation. It refers to the shift at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries away from the categorisation of literature into 'ancient' and 'modern' (which presupposed the recognition of the former as a model for the writing of the 'civilised world') and towards a classification based on national criteria. This change, linked to the Romantic fascination with popular culture and the beginnings of research into the oldest sources for the history of states, marked not only the disintegration of literary universalism of fundamental importance in the Age of Enlightenment but, above all, the rise in importance of literature hitherto considered peripheral. As Casanova emphasised, the sources of national culture were no longer found in the imitation of ancient works but in indigenous folklore, in songs and fairy tales, which were to become the main source of inspiration for newer literature. The latter, by presenting itself as 'national literature', began to be seen as a representation of the nation as a whole. By reflecting its artistry and originality, it was to testify to the prestige and new aspirations of the nation.

5 M. Hroch, *Małe narody Europy: perspektywa historyczna*, transl. G. Pańko, Wrocław 2003.

6 P. Casanova, *Światowa republika literatury*, trans. E. Galuszka, A. Turczyn, Krakow 2017 (orig. *La République mondiale des lettres*, Paris 1999).

As can be seen from the above overview, the editors of the volume distanced themselves somewhat from the belief in the modern genesis of nations, which (according to Hroch) often amounted to repeatedly quoting Ernest Gellner's words about the 'creation of nations by nationalism'. In the footsteps of Anthony Smith, it emphasised the importance of earlier, pre-modern identities and the significance of local cultures and languages for the formation of modern nations. Such an assumption, however, does not imply a critique of national constructivism. The authors rightly point out that the codification of individual dialects, or even the mere recording of hitherto functioning only in oral transmission, completely changed their meaning. On the other hand, the intellectuals who undertook this task reinterpreted them, creating *de facto* a new literature - a literature emblematic of the nation.

The reviewed volume opens with Viktorija Šeina's text, which is a methodological introduction to the consideration of the formation (emergence) of national canons.⁷ The starting point here is the need to treat canon studies as an integral part of social history. Instead of considering the phenomenon of their emergence and development as a strictly literary one, she proposed to look at the behind-the-scenes discovery of popular culture as a response to the new social and political needs of the intellectuals of the peripheral areas. In her view, the latter saw themselves as co-creators of national identity. By portraying folk culture as the 'sacred essence' of the nation, they 'imbued it with new emotional content and symbolic capital' by creating its idealised model. An example of this was the writing down and publication of folk songs, which were to function as written texts through which the nation 'speaks'. This lofty goal, however, required control by those intellectuals able to decide which songs (or fragments thereof) corresponded to national needs and which could not fulfil such a function. In the following decades of the nineteenth century, a new 'conception of national literature

7 V. Šeina, *Nation-building canons: historical and methodological considerations*, in: *Literary canon formation...*, pp. 1-24.

[...] radically transformed the hitherto existing conception of literature'. The essence of these changes was the nation's identification with the linguistic community and the recognition of folk creativity (especially song and epic) as the basis of national literature. The close relationship between literature and the nation was thus formed. As the author points out, the literary canon, reflecting the 'national spirit', henceforth had the task of shaping 'images of national communities', depicting the typical national landscape and its places of remembrance (*lieux de mémoire*), representing the nation's past, and convincing readers of the purposefulness of the nation's existence - its historical and axiological mission.

Johann Gottfried Herder's ethno-cultural concept of the nation was of great interest in the former Polish-Lithuanian state, especially in its eastern part within the Russian Empire. A specific 'laboratory' for its practical application turned out to be the Imperial University of Vilnius - the university that drew extensively on the achievements of the Jesuit academy and the Main School of Lithuania, which had existed since 1579. As Helena Markowska-Fulara points out, in the first decades of the 19th century, there was a dispute at the university over two interpretations of the literary canon. The first one - represented by Jan Śniadecki - referred to the idea of Enlightenment universalism and treated the canon as a collection of literature based on the works of ancient and modern (mainly French) classics and those Polish authors who used the model literary language.⁸ The fundamental purpose of reading was, on the one hand, to 'improve oneself in speech and writing', and on the other hand, the sheer pleasure of reading. The second interpretation of the canon belonged to Feliks Bentkowski. Inspired by the work of the Brothers Grimm and James Macpherson, he was convinced that the canon should reflect first and foremost the oldest texts (*monumenta*) of a given nation, represent all areas of native writing as widely as possible and turn towards popular culture.

8 H. Markowska-Fulara, *Classicists and the classics. The Polish literary canon in Academia (1800-1830)*, in: *Literary canon formation...*, pp. 27-38.

With the consolidation of the link between the nation and literature, awareness of the importance of the literary canon grew in the circle of Vilnius intellectuals. In the text by Brigita Speičytė, various views on the understanding of the Lithuanian canon before 1863 are described.⁹ Tadeusz Czacki believed that it mainly included the *Statutes of Lithuania*, considered as documents reflecting the old Lithuanian customary law. In this way, Czacki made a turn towards the unknown and ‘exotic’ Lithuanian culture for the elites of the time, treating it as a source of local identity. Ksawery Bohusz, although he distanced himself from such interpretations and advocated a civic and historical definition of Lithuanianness, was convinced that the University of Vilnius should undertake the study of the Lithuanian language and the study of its ‘monuments of antiquity’. He regarded the lack of knowledge of the latter as a historical ‘misfortune’ preventing a thorough study of the most ancient history of the Lithuanian state and an understanding of one of the languages of the Commonwealth. Ludwig Rhesa, who originated from the so-called ‘little Lithuania’ (the Lithuanian-speaking area of Prussia), described Lithuanian literature in an even different way. As a professor at the University of Königsberg, he found himself in the orbit of German philological concepts, according to which Lithuanianness was expressed primarily in language and especially in folk songs. They were to be expressed primarily by the composer of *The Seasons* (*Metai*) – Kristijonas Donelaitis, considered the Lithuanian national bard. Adam Mickiewicz essentially agreed with the ‘ethnographic’ (cultural) definition of Lithuanian literature but described the Lithuanian nation in terms of the heterogeneous multilingual historical nation of the eastern part of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In this understanding, Lithuanian literature was a noteworthy element of its culture but remained inaccessible to the author of *Pan Tadeusz* for linguistic reasons. Ludwik Adam Jucewicz, a Samogitian priest, folklorist and historian, saw the question of Lithuani-

9 B. Speičytė, *The concept of Lithuanian literature in the 19th century*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 39-63.

an literature in an even different light. According to him, Lithuanian literature was, in its essence, bilingual, and the basic role in learning about it was to be played by translations from Polish into Lithuanian and vice versa. As the researcher points out, Juzevicz thus created a Polish-Lithuanian model of literature, which theoretically could have been similar with Swedish-Finnish model in Finland, in which ‘the historically dominant writing in Swedish was transformed into a linguistic minority in the Finnish literary system’. Other interpretations belonged to Michal Balinski and Eustachy Tyszkiewicz. The former, like Czacki, treated Lithuanian literature as a regional exoticism but placed it exclusively in the context of Polish culture and literature. The latter, on the other hand, while criticising this approach, was convinced that both ancient and contemporary Lithuanian literature in both languages were of crucial importance for the intellectual life of the country.

The figure and work of Eustachy Tyszkiewicz, an activist of the Vilnius Provisional Archaeological Commission and the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities, was the subject of Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn’s research. In an article devoted to the creation of an unofficial canon in the North Western Land of the Russian Empire in the inter-war period, the author considers his activities in the light of Friedrich Nietzsche’s early views.¹⁰ As interpreted by the German philosopher, the unofficial canon (as opposed to the imperial canon) represented the aspirations of indigenous elites interested in the survival and revival of endangered values through a ‘reverent’ approach to the past. He referred to this reverence and respect for the past as pietism. In addition to its colloquial meaning, the term denoted a specific religious emotionality formed based on German Protestantism in the late 17th century. Its basic characteristics were religious fervour and intensive study of the Scriptures. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, religious pietism was gradually secularised, which meant a kind of sacralisation of

10 R. Okulicz-Kozaryn, *Towards an unofficial canon: striving to strengthen the Lithuanian cultural community under Russian domination in the mid-19th century*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 64-85.

non-religious literary works. ‘Thus,’ the author pointed out, ‘the canon, as a term referring to biblical texts, acquired a new meaning and began to include secular literary works as well, which were considered equally significant [...]. The only thing that was subject to change was the notion of inspiration. Its authenticity was no longer to be verified by the Church (inspired by the Holy Spirit) but by secular authorities: academies, schools, theatres, or the editors’ of periodicals.’

The opening in 1856, on the initiative of Count Tyszkiewicz, of the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities, bringing together not only numismatic collections, collections of medals, engravings and woodcuts, but also an impressive library of some 3,000 volumes, was undoubtedly an attempt to create a material image of Lithuanianness, to be expressed in the artefacts found in the ground and in the books placed on the shelves. As the researcher points out, referring to the notes of Adam Honory Kirkor, ‘if it had not been for the liquidation of this institution, looting and the fragmentation of the collection, the Museum would have helped to draw up a list of compulsory reading for every Lithuanian’. Its task was to shape a specific Polish-Lithuanian identity as part of the Polish national and civic community. The most important items in the museum’s library were the *Statutes of Lithuania*, a two-volume monograph on the subject by Tadeusz Czacki (*On Lithuanian and Polish Laws*) first published in Warsaw in 1800, and Maciej Strykowski’s *Chronicle of Poland, Lithuania and Samogitia*. The remaining readings mostly represented Romantic poetry permitted by the censorship (poems by Antoni E. Odyniec; *Pan Tadeusz*), historical studies by Wincenty Korotyński, novels by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski and Ignacy Chodźko, and above all the poetry of Władysław Syrokomla. Although the figure and works of Adam Mickiewicz – acknowledged as the undisputed national bard and emblematic expression of Polishness – could not be found there for censorship reasons, they were universally revered, placed (as Aleksander Tyszyński put it) ‘as if beyond the horizon of the real world, in the sphere of superior values and unknowns’. In addition to the influence of the museum

book collection, the Polish unofficial literary canon was formed through the circulation of books among the Lithuanian landed gentry. Books circulated within the family, among friends, and in the parish, 'constituting cultural centres that successfully avoided state control without being exposed to terror'. Private libraries thus became the foundation of Polishness expressed through literature. In this way, Polishness worshipped in an almost religious manner became the basis for a new cultural understanding of the national community.

Alongside the formation of the Polish literary canon in the libraries of the Lithuanian landed gentry, the (ethnic) 'Lithuanian canon' was increasingly prominent. These canons emerged in parallel in the first half of the 19th century and were treated as complementary until 1863. In them, Polishness represented historical continuity and cultural coherence, while Lithuanianness expressed admiration for the indigenous culture and its unusual language. Over time, these canons began to diverge from each other and eventually diverged completely. The founders of the Lithuanian national revival of the second half of the 19th century adopted an exclusively ethno-cultural definition of Lithuanianness, rejecting its connection with Polish culture. As Vaidas Šeferis points out, this tendency had its source in the activity of, already mentioned, Ludwik Rhesa.¹¹ The latter, understood Lithuanian literature in close relation to the Lithuanian language and folklore and considered Kristijonas Donelaitis to be its exponent. His poetry, analysed from a linguistic perspective from the mid-19th century onwards, was gaining popularity among Lithuanian intellectuals. They drew their pride, which gradually took on an identity character, from their claims about the archaic nature of the Lithuanian language. As the author formulated it, 'the emotional connection with the mother tongue became the cornerstone of contemporary Lithuanian identity'. Its second foundation, was folk songs. Ac-

11 V. Šeferis, *The borderland between conflicting canons: Kristijonas Donelaitis*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 230-255.

According to Jurga Sadauskienė, the founders of Lithuanian national identity adopted the view of Johann Gottfried Herder, who saw in these songs ‘the archive of a nation, the treasure of its science and religion, its theogony and cosmology’. Songs were thus to play the role of a depository of national values and the foundation myth of national culture.¹² Paradoxically, along with the idealisation of folk songs, there was, at the same time, a growing belief that they could be used *en masse* to more effectively ‘nationalise’ the Lithuanian folk strata. For this reason, attempts were made to ‘correct’ the content of folk songs to ‘cleanse’ them from a layer of alleged ‘foreign influence’ and then – in printed form – distribute them to the rural population learning to read. Placing folksongs next to lyric poetry gave them a new rank, ‘putting them on a par with high literature’. With the publication of folk songs, attempts were also made to arrange them for choirs – in this way, their sound was more attractive and modernised, and they could be performed on stage. There is no doubt that the entry of folk songs into the Lithuanian literary canon completely changed both their original character and their traditional social function.

Another example of the formation of the Lithuanian literary canon is shown by Aistė Kučinskienė in her article on the concept of the ‘national poet’.¹³ The author interprets the reception of Maironis’ work among Lithuanian literary critics as an ideologically motivated attempt to use the Lithuanian poet as a symbol of nation-building. At the end of the nineteenth century, there was no doubt that every nation should have ‘its’ poet, constituting ‘an obligatory element of national identity’. On the other hand, the reception of the work of Žemaitė, a writer from a peasant background, as described by Ramunė Bleizgienė, was somewhat different.¹⁴ Through the growing group of ‘new readers’, a social group

12 J. Sadauskienė, *The concept of Lithuanian folk song in Lithuanian folklore 1800-1940*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 86-106.

13 A. Kučinskienė, *The making of the Lithuanian national poet: Maironis*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 256-272.

14 R. Bleizgienė, *Cultivation of new readers in the early criticism of Žemaitė’s works (1895-1915)*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 273-294.

emerged in Lithuania that began to see itself as part of modern Lithuanian society. The reading of the novels of the ‘peasant writer’ was grassroots and spontaneous, shattering the common belief that the creation of the canon was a top-down process and that ‘un-enlightened’ peasants – like children – should be excluded from it.

Gergely Fórizs’ text on the manner of nation-building in nineteenth-century Hungary¹⁵ should be considered as a summary of the examples of literary canon formation cited here. Analysing Hungarian nationalism, the author rejects the categorically accepted notion of ‘nation-building’ in Anglo-Saxon discourse and proposes to replace it with the notion of *nation-bricolage*, which can be translated as slow (artisanal) nation building. Referring to the views of Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida and Gerard Genette, the Hungarian researcher is convinced that there is a continuity between the national ideas of the past and efforts at national self-identification. Indeed, Hungarian intellectuals did not see their role as ‘engineers’ who ‘built’ a new society from scratch but as craftsmen who gradually formed a nation out of individual elements from the past, which was ‘composed of both organic aspects’ rooted in the past and volitional aspects. A particular tool in their hands was literature, which was to be seen as compensation for the non-existent state. As the author points out, ‘in this way, the narrative of the “awakening” of the (always) existing nation became a common pattern [...] of Eastern European stateless literary cultures’.

The Hungarian researcher, like most of the other contributors to the volume, therefore agreed with the editors’ position on the specificity of the formation of the canon in the eastern part of the European continent as having its origins in the folk turn brought about by the ‘Herder revolution’. It was expressed in the ‘discovery’ of ancient, forgotten cultures and languages, and then through a kind of ‘mystification’, recontextualisation and concealment

15 G. Fórizs, *Nation-building or nation-bricolage? The making of a national poet in 19th-century Hungary*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 165-182, https://real.mtak.hu/121153/1/F%C3%B3rizs_Nation%20Building%20or%20Nation%20Bricolage.pdf [accessed 24.05.2024].

of that part of the cultural heritage which seemed ‘irrelevant or controversial from a national point of view’. Although this process was initially top-down (from the elite to the popular strata), over time, the roles could be reversed so that the readers could shape the national canon assimilated and recognised as their own.

While this picture adequately describes the creation of ‘new’ canons, it fails to take into account that there were already ‘historical’ literary traditions in Central and Eastern Europe, which, although considered peripheral in Western European countries, had their own formed literary canons. These certainly included Polish literature, which was dominant throughout the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and (to a lesser extent) German, Ruthenian and Jewish literature. Despite the disagreements between ‘classicists’ and ‘romantics’ at Vilnius University, there was no doubt that the matrix of local Lithuanian identity, therefore, remained, at least in the mid-nineteenth century, Polish literature, which (depending on the views of individual intellectuals) could be enriched by Lithuanian literature just being ‘discovered’. The formation of literary canons in this area was not, therefore, subject only to processes that amounted to their ‘elaboration’ through the painstaking work of national ‘craftsmen’. On the contrary, it was (as Vaidas Šeferis points out) a process full of tension and conflict, amounting to competition between individual literary canons, often for the same readers. For this reason, in my view, a ‘regional’ approach to the history of the canon(s) may hinder rather than explain the understanding of the latter. Irrespective of these remarks, I am convinced that the work edited by the three Lithuanian researchers is a very valuable position, which enriches our knowledge of the nineteenth-century fate of literary canons, partially fills the gap concerning the formation of the Polish literary canon and presents the literary canons of Central and Eastern Europe, which are poorly known in Poland, providing very interesting comparative material for further research.

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