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The Reflection of National Historical Traumas in Selected Lithuanian Poetry

Refleksja nad traumami historii narodu w wybranej poezji litewskiej

Keywords: Lithuanian poetry, theology of literature, theodicy, political occupation

Słowa kluczowe: poezja litewska, teologia literatury, teodycea, okupacja polityczna

Abstract

This article examines how Lithuanian poetry reflects traumatic national experiences and contributes to the formation of national identity in the face of historical injustice. The central intertext of this literary interpretation is Christianity, with the Bible at its core. The theoretical framework guiding this analysis is the theology of literature, which explores the literary interpretation of the origin and sense of human existence.

Lithuanian poetry engages with the two periods of Russian occupation in the 19th and 20th centuries, attempting to explain the theodic problem of national history. The theodic thought in Lithuanian poetry reflects worldview challenges from both personal and national existential perspectives, focusing on the drama of seeking God and the weight of freedom of choice. By combining universal theodic reflections on free will and the mystery of God with the historical national experience, Lithuanian poetry underscores the primacy of the internal (moral and spiritual) sphere of both the individual and the nation in the contexts of occupation and genocide.

To tell a story about the facts of the past means to interpret the past. The New Historicism emphasizes that when a historian moves from recording past events (as a strict scientist) to connecting them or arranging the events in the foreground or background, then he tells a story, which is always an interpretation. For the

New Historicism, to interpret events always means to express ideology and thus to actualize human need for social power (Greenblatt 1990). It is true that interpretation requires an ideological position. However, ideology not necessarily is just a result of human need for power. Ideology (a system of ideas, a harmony of ideas) may also be a result of human need to perceive oneself and the world. Cultural mentality researcher Hayden White, commenting on the historian's admiration for the truth of pure fact and not denying the importance of critical historiography, highlights the value of the narrative element. To connect the facts of individual or community experience with a narrative, i.e., to interpret them and to explain their meaning, is an important need of human nature, appearing in myths (White 1995). To tell a story means to understand, to grasp its meaning.

This article investigates how Lithuanian poetry interprets traumatic national experience and thus forms national identity in the face of historical injustice. The political-historical context of this literary interpretation is two periods of Lithuanian history when Lithuania was occupied by Russia: in the 19th and the 20th centuries. Toward the end of the 18th century the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was divided among the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and the Habsburg monarchy: the three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772–1795). According to the principles of the law and morality of nations, this division of the independent Polish-Lithuanian state was absolutely illegal. After these divisions, most of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was occupied by tsarist Russia. Lithuanians and Poles repeatedly revolted against Russian occupation in the 19th century with the slogan “For our and your freedom” (1831, 1863); the uprisings were kept down, and their participants were repressed (executions, prisons, Siberian exiles). In 1918, Lithuania re-established its nation state, but in 1940, Russia occupied it again. Genocide of the Lithuanian nation was committed (Siberian exiles of farmers, executions of intellectuals in Russian concentration camps). This second occupation lasted until 1990: in 1988, the Lithuanian Sajūdis movement arose, a follower of the Polish Solidarność movement. Sajūdis, the Reform Movement of Lithuania, was a political organization which led the struggle for the independent Lithuanian state. In 1990, Lithuanian Independence was restored. In January 1991, Russia attempted to bring back Soviet power in Lithuania and to carry out a coup d'état. The Soviet army and the KGB were used for this. Many Lithuanians participated in the January events: they foiled the coup d'état and defended their own legally elected government and the country's Independence.

The main intertext of the literary interpretation of the dramatism of Lithuania's history is Christianity (with the Bible in its centre). The basic theoretical perspective

of this analysis is theology of literature. Theology of literature is the interdisciplinary theory that explains the relationships between literature and theology. It combines aesthetical and theological criteria, investigates how literature explores questions of transcendence. Theology of literature examines the theological context of literature, the Bible's influence on literature, and the existential religious search seen in literary works (Sawicki 1983: 20–21; Szymik 1994: 128). Literature interprets and seeks to explain the existential experience of the individual and society. The main question raised by literary theological thought is always more concerned with a human being rather than with God, as literature itself is a form of human consciousness. The theology of literature illuminates the literary interpretation of the origin and sense of human existence.

When Lithuanian poetry interprets the two periods of Lithuania's occupation by Russia in the 19th and in the 20th centuries, it tries to explain the theodic problem of national history. Theodicy is a philosophical and theological attempt to reconcile the traditional divine characteristics of omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omniscience with the presence of evil or suffering in the human and the natural world (The New Dictionary of Theology 1987: 1009; Rahner 1987: 465–466). The contradiction between the omnipotence of God and evil that exists in the world is the main question of philosophical reflection of God. Literary theodicy is literary thinking about the paradox of God's love and existential evil, about justification of God in the face of innocent sufferings (Čiočytė 2013: 99–108).

An incisive reflection on the dramatic sense of national history is offered in the works of Antanas Baranauskas (1835–1902), the famous Lithuanian Romanticist¹. In his narrative poem *Journey to St Petersburg* (*Kelionė į Petaburką*, St Petersburg, 1858–1859) Baranauskas contemplates the dramatic situation of Lithuania being occupied by the Russian Empire.

This narrative poem is a travel self-reflection and meditation. The traveller's situation is one that inherently induces withdrawal from everyday worries and invites daydreaming, reflection and perhaps prayer. The narrator of the *Journey to St Petersburg* is a future priest (cleric) who seeks high theological studies in St Petersburg Theological Academy (the Vilnius University's Faculty of Theology in exile; this situation of theological studies corresponds to the biographical context of the poem). The narrator in his free-roaming, intimate reflection combines his personal biographical plans with the aggression and occupation his nation suffers at the hands of Russia. As is typical of the national Romanticism, he perceives his

¹ For more information refer to Dalia Čiočytė 2009: 121–128.

nation as his own extended family. The poem is brimful of anti-occupation pathos. The poetic pathos is directed against the political aggressor, who is, in this case, Russian and Orthodox (“Greek”), or Russian using Orthodoxy to justify aggression.

From our present-day viewpoint of political correctness, it is obvious that it is one thing to prejudge a nation negatively *a priori*, and it is quite another thing to perceive the nation as the enemy after having experienced this nation’s aggression, in a situation of aggression. The experience of occupation inevitably establishes the aggressor as an enemy. How to behave in the face of this enemy is another matter. In his *Journey to St Petersburg*, Baranauskas appeals to the Lithuanians to uphold their moral qualities and national identity and to pray for the enemy, for Russia’s conversion:

Through toil let’s seek for Muscovy the warmest grace,
So that souls grown cold might warm up to God.
Praised be the hearts that keep the faith,
For the love of God and men, spurning the world.
From these hearts many a morning star must rise,
Before for Muscovy the day of faith dawns (Baranauskas 1994: 65).

The poet interprets the great neighbour state’s aggression against a small nation as a breach of God’s will (or God’s Law), and this will face metaphysical, apocalyptic judgement. The metonymy of Russia, as the aggressive political neighbour, is the “Son of the North”. Russia is a large, vast country, but for Lithuanians, due to their experience of Siberian exiles, it is the North (“Even if you exile us to Siberia / we won’t be defeated there” (Baranauskas 1994: 51)). In Baranauskas’ poetic story about Lithuania’s political drama, the “Son of the North” tries to attack not only Lithuanian science and press, but also the hearts of Lithuanians. He wants to freeze their hearts with ice. This poetic motif of frozen hearts has an allusion of the image of frozen souls in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, in the deepest (the ninth) circle of Dante’s vision of Hell. Baranauskas offers a glaring vision of a “crumbling world” (the fifth song of *Journey to St Petersburg*). Here we see the “Son of the North” falling down, as Satan falls down in the biblical Apocalypse (*Luke 10, 18*: “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”). The Baranauskas’ “Son of the North” is not directly associated with Satan, but in the space of poetic connotations this character takes on a dark metaphysical background:

The world’s light will dim; darkness will be like a Sun;
Mountains will tumble and valleys will rise,

All might will turn to dust and weakness will grow strong!
Tremble thou as well, son of the North, thronging together, –
Tumbling into perdition, thou wilt not draw us along! (Baranauskas 1994: 51)

In this vision, as in the biblical prophecies of the end of the world, the first become the last and the last become the first. But who are the first and the last in this case? Baranauskas' poetics develops the play of ambiguity. The poetic thought balances compellingly between the notions of intellectual, moral and metaphysical darkness. When the author of the poem regrets that "the north shines forth with its science, but Lithuania is plunged in black darkness", then this is the darkness threatening Lithuania because of the occupying authorities' suppression of press and education. When he refers to the darkness that, at the end of time, in this apocalyptic vision of a "crumbling world", will shine forth like a Sun, then this darkness stands for the redeeming suffering of Lithuania. Ignorance / darkness caused by the occupiers' denying people "both writ and print" is a form of suffering that becomes light before God's tribunal. Such is Baranauskas' philosophy and theology of national history: Lithuania will win at the final settling of accounts.

Thus, in the *Journey to St Petersburg*, the light vs darkness metaphor highlights a problem of the philosophy of science: learning dissociated from morality becomes an oxymoronic dark light: "So Muscovy's light is now bloody and black, / For knowledge does not come from printing but is a gift of God" (13th song).

In his poem *The Poet's Conversation with Lithuania* (*Pasikalbėjimas Giesminyko su Lietuva*, Petersburg, 1859) Baranauskas develops a very interesting poetic philosophy of true science:

True science you will never fathom,
It can never be told in song or in words.
Who will measure the expanses of the earth?
The depths of the seas, the heights of the skies?
There's a limit to all expanses, a bottom to depths, –
But there's no end to learning, for wisdom is God. (Baranauskas 1994: 76)

The poet sees the world as God's creation: like each creative work it reflects the author's thought and wisdom. Science, which looks for the laws underlying the world, is extolled: doing science this way is to meet the wisdom of God.

In another poem, *God's Birch and Grace* (*Dievo rykštė ir malonė*, Anykščiai 1859) Baranauskas attributes the people's suffering not so much to sinful foreign aggression as to Divine pedagogy. Here Baranauskas' poetic story inscribes the historical path of Lithuania into the biblical narrative about the history of the

ancient Israelites. The history of the biblical Israel is a sequence of downfalls and rises: *Eden – Wilderness – Promised Land – Egypt – Jerusalem – Babylon...* This is so because the biblical history of Israelites, in the period from the covenant with Abraham to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, is a form of God's revelation. When the biblical nation experiences a rise, the biblical author shows to the readers what behavior is appropriate for a human being, and vice versa (every downfall is connected with representation of a sin). This wavy shape of Israel's history is a variation of the main U-shaped structure of the biblical mega narrative: this mega narrative indicates the meaning of metaphysical hope (in the Bible man loses the tree and the water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of The Book of Revelation). The U-shaped narrative is the standard shape of comedy in the Medieval notion of this genre: a story having a "good ending" (that's why Northrop Frye calls the Bible "divine comedy", which Dante imitated (Frye 1983: 169–199)). Baranauskas also shapes Lithuanian history according to the hopeful wavy structure: *the mythical Eden – Eden left – ancient "golden age" – the injury done to Lithuanians by the Teutons – Lithuania's baptism and the growth of state power – Lithuania occupied by Russia...* In the present tense of the poem Lithuania is experiencing a downfall (it is occupied by Russia). The poet interprets the biblical link between a downfall and a sin, and develops the idea of Divine pedagogy. He couches this Divine pedagogy in the metaphor of a child's walking frame. Just as a walker teaches a child to stand on its feet, foreign occupation is like a frame teaching the nation to tread the paths of life:

A child, once grown up, has no need of a walker.
Once we have shed our childish ways,
We'll grow strong in the fear and grace of God:
The Lord will lift us from our walking frames,
And make our freedom blossom like a summer meadow,
And keep us happy as a cow in clover.

If He sees but love in each of our deeds,
He will restore us to our former glory,
Of which our bad deeds have deprived us.
He will raise us to might, and shatter our yoke,
And save us Himself from the devil's snares,
And give us a life of quietude and plenty. (Baranauskas 1994: 105)

Baranauskas advances the idea that one has to be worthy of freedom, and that it is not easy to enslave a person with a mature and loving soul. This is an

interesting line of thought in the discourse on individual and national dignity. What is important is not whether it is possible to enslave a person or nation that is spiritually free; the poet urges us to look for the sources of bondage in ourselves and to tackle our misfortunes on our own. According to the poet, we should surmount our misfortunes and the iniquity we suffer by starting with ourselves, by taking care of our own morals and our spiritual freedom. This imperative to “start with ourselves” betokens the maturity and dignity of the spirit. An important characteristic of Baranauskas’ thinking about the Russian occupation is the idea of national dignity, self-respect and self-reliance.

A similar extension of the self in the context of national oppression can be seen in the works of the main Lithuanian Romanticist Jonas Mačiulis-Maironis (1862–1932). Maironis’ interpretation of Lithuania’s political drama advances the poetic idea of self-improvement through suffering, of liberation from political bondage through moral and spiritual growth, and of the fostering of inner freedom:

And yet Lithuania
Will awake one day:
Not vain its suffering!
They will hear the psaltery’s sound,
Sleeping blood will boil,
For the Cross promises life,
In pain our strength will grow,
And will await resurrection:
The darkened air already brightens.
Let us haste to work!
Let us haste to love!
And, friends, we will move the earth! (Maironis 1988: 6–7)

Lithuania will be free because it has suffered so much, and because the Cross promises life (*Young Lithuania*, 1907). In addition to this biblical motivation for the liberation of Lithuania, Maironis develops two more archetypal motivations: Lithuania will rise like spring dawning in nature (poetry collection *Voices of Spring*, *Pavasario balsai*, first edition 1895) and will awake like a fairy-tale princess (“having awakened from eternal sleep, the Motherland rubbed her sleepy eyes” (Maironis 1988: 101)). Here awakening (from winter sleep, from a fairy-tale beauty’s sleep) means spiritual alertness and intense self-awareness. Together with this, Maironis romantically poeticizes the solidarity of nations fighting for freedom (“The Slavs have already rebelled. From the Black Sea coast, / Spring travels through the Carpathian Mountains” (Maironis 1988: 6–7)).

In the context of Russian aggression in the 20th century, Lithuanian poetry demonstrates the metaphysical hope and thus the refusal to identify with the role of a victim. Antanas Miškinis (1905–1983), the Neo-Romantic poet, in his psalms from the deportation camp (written in 1947–1948) engages in a dialogue with the biblical Psalter. The poet develops the principal theme of the Psalms: a meditation on how to deal with suffering. The biblical Psalter associates suffering with sin and sees sin-afflicted humanity on the bottom of the pit (cf. *Psalms* 88, 7: “Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.”).

The space of Miškinis’ psalms is the Gulag camp’s torture cellar (“We are thrown into filthy cellars”) (Miškinis 1989: 63), associated with the biblical psalm “From the depths of despair” (*Psalms* 130, 1). (This psalm was also interpreted in the same context of the Soviet genocide of Lithuanian people by the famous Exodus poet Bernardas Brazdžionis in the excellent, masterfully orchestrated Neo-Romantic work “De profundis”; Brazdžionis highlights the psychological nature of the biblical metaphor “From the depths of despair” through the suggestive poetic variations: “From the depths I call upon You, O Lord, / From the depths of my grieving heart...” (Brazdžionis 1989: 265))

By the poetics of prayer Miškinis develops the link between the Gulag torture cellar and the pit of the biblical psalms:

We are led away with angry abuse
By prematurely booze-worn, bloated faces.
Their swearing and threats fill us with horror...
We are thrown into squalid cellars.
They threaten us, they threaten even You,
Mocking You with distorted faces.
And everyone is cynically tormented
With lies and deceitful promises. (from the psalm “Prisoners”) (Miškinis 1989: 63)

In a biblical fashion Miškinis’ lyrical story juxtaposes the themes of the pit of suffering and the pit of sin. The aggressor is viewed as “enslaved by Satan’s savagery”, “vanquished by Satan”, “lapsed”, “fallen this low.”

The righteousness of the nation subjected to Soviet genocide is affirmed and at the same time questioned in a dialogue of two psalms. In the poem “Out of the depths we cry...” the acts of devotion of the God-abandoned nation are reproachfully held up (cf. *Psalms* 44, 18: “All this is come upon us; yet have we not forgotten thee.”):

Our blood congealed from pain,
And recoiled from the ruthless silence.

O Lord, didst Thou really need
To abase and punish us like this?

[...]

Why then, Lord, dost Thou abandon us now,
Leaving us in the dragon's claws?

We fall prostrate before Thy wrathful countenance—

O Father Who Art in Heaven... ("Out of the depths we cry...") (Miškinis 1989: 30–31)

The psalm "The voice of conscience" seems to offer an answer to these reproaches by advancing the idea of self-improvement through suffering. According to the lyrical ego, the conscience of Lithuanians speaks with a heavenly voice: "You thought you were living righteously, but you were hardened in souls"; "You realized that you were doing a lot wrong only when you came to the edge of the abyss" (Miškinis 1989: 32).

In the psalm "Vision" a messianic hope emerges from the depths of sin and death:

I see – hanging on the Cross so high
Thou, our Saviour, art mute in suffering.
I renounce vengeance and pride,
I renounce Satan's inventions. (Miškinis 1989: 16)

This is an interpretation of the unique structure of the saving act of Jesus Christ: to conquer by descending to the underworld and to rise (the U-shaped narrative). The Messiah descends to the depths of the lyrical ego ("You come to my cellar to console me"; "through thick walls of masonry, / Armed with guards and bars", – an allusion to the evangelical resurrection from the grave); the space of the lyrical ego is unified with the archetypal starry space of the Divine ("And my cellar is abloom with stars"), the pit acquires a vertical dimension. As in the book of the biblical prophet Jonah: "Yet hast thou brought up my life from the pit" (*Jonah* 2, 4–6). The *pit* is associated with the *grave*, with death. Biblical resurrection is contrasted with physical and spiritual death.

In interpreting the dramatic course of national history, Lithuanian poetry links the Bible, and Christianity, with old popular beliefs. Poetic thinking establishes significant ties between Christianity and ancient religion. One of the most suggestive parallels is drawn by the prominent poet in Exodus, Kazys Bradūnas (1917–2009). In the original Baltic mythological tale "Eglė Queen of the Grass Snakes" (the tale about the murdered metaphysical king) he sees the character of king Žilvinas as an archaic prefiguration of Christ:

I count, I count the gods,
And in the end there is only one.

And from the grass snake's head
There flows blood and milk.

There flows foam of blood and milk,
God's hands wipe it away,
Untouched by God's hands,
It runs down my cheek. (from the poem "Blood and milk") (Bradūnas 1994: 99)

The poetic identification of Christ and Žilvinas is rendered more concrete by the mythological motif of the "foam of blood and milk". In the world of the mythological tale there is a disjunction (the foam of milk or blood), which in the poem becomes a conjunction alluding to the blood and water flowing from Christ's wounds in the Gospel (*John 19, 34*). The conjunction *and* opening the third line has both its literal meaning, as a connective between poetic images, and an elliptic sense: it connects the blood and water from the crucifixion scene in the Gospel with the blood and milk of the mythological scene. By juxtaposing Christian contexts with those of archaic religion, the poet closely connects the dramatic course of national history with the redeeming suffering of Christ.

In the period in which Lithuania had to defend its newly recovered independence, the traumatic experience of January 13, 1991, was referred to by the prominent poet Almis Grybauskas (born 1947) in his poem "The Twelfth Night", published in the weekly *Literature and the Arts* in the wake of the bloody incidents. The lyrical story depicts the Soviet aggression and its heroic victims. The lyrical I interprets these January events as an apocalyptic destruction of the world:

Down at the hill foot words are still heartbeats one can still fall
Into shadow, into silence, into the lead trod by our feet
One can still become an asp, an ash, overgrow with wood and bark
Still I don't hear myself I have not learnt to hear You

From afar from the depths from beyond seas woods borders
I feel spreading drifting approaching murmuring
the deadly ripples of congealed anguish, the hemlock
but I still can't hear what You say through chaos and throb

The dusk falls, the night comes and one sees the unwithering
When the inner eye, half-open, drinks up the vision –
They have stripped off their bodies their essences rise and rise
No longer distracted they rise at night into the open Kingdom

And I say it's not true I say no death and chase away the remembrance
– Ho there! – I shout, standing at the edge of the unknown

A wave rolls in and mutely eddies at my feet
And the foam floats ashore and yet one has to live on. (Grybauskas 2007: 44)

In a masterful way the poem's fabric links two mainstays of national consciousness: mythology (the tale of Eglė Queen of the Grass Snakes) and Christianity. The images of trees and the motif of transformation into a tree ("overgrowing with bark") in the first strophe introduce the reader into the mythological context of the tale. The second strophe evokes the approaching catastrophe through the acoustic image of Žilvinas' blood-soaked wave ("the deadly ripples of congealed anguish, the hemlock"). The catastrophe draws near from metaphysical depths ("From afar from the depths from beyond seas woods borders"). Most important for the lyrical I in this context of approaching calamity is to *hear*, to hear himself and to hear the transcendent "you". To hear means to be in contact with transcendence, to experience the contact. A suggestive image is created of the subject's worry about being in time to experience metaphysical communion: this communion is first sought through the word *still*, expressing metaphysical want ("Still I don't hear myself I have not learnt to hear You") while there is *still* time ("it is still possible"). There is a hint at the crucial connection between hearing oneself and being able to hear God. In the second strophe the quickening anapestic rhythm and the euphony imitating heavy cobbles impressively evokes the imminent threat of a wave as a background for a call for communion uttered with dramatic fear of ontological abandonment: "but I still can't hear what You say through chaos and throb." This is the apocalyptic foundering of the world, a variation on the metaphysical curtain: to hear through the deafening noise what is most important: to hear if there is anything to hear.

The third strophe metaphorically refers to the death of the freedom fighters. It reflects the subject's transcendent experience: with his spiritual gaze ("the inner eye") he sees the immortality of the souls / essences of those who died. The mythological blood-soaked wave, its approach and outrush gives shape to the catastrophe. The fateful night's experience ebbs away like a wave, but it is the mythological blood-soaked wave that assumes the sense of an absolute end. A heavy semantic load is concentrated in the poem's final phrase: "and yet one has to live on." The finale of the poem is open, in a dialogic form: the question is how to live on; it is suggested that after January 13 it is impossible to live as one lived before the catastrophe. Thus the catastrophe is perceived as the metaphysical illumination of the lyrical ego's worldview.

Lithuanian poetic, lyrical stories interpret national historical traumas in the context of the biblical U-shaped narrative (Psalms, Crucifixion), in the context of

the wavy path of the biblical nation (with the link between a misfortune and a sin), and in the context of the biblical Apocalypse (the accent of the metaphysical hope). In interpreting the dramatic course of national history, Lithuanian poetry links the Bible, and Christianity, with the ancient Lithuanian worldview.

The theodic thought of Lithuanian poetry reflects worldview challenges in the perspective of personal and national existential experience and highlights the drama of the search for God, and the weight of freedom of choice. Combining universal theodic reflections on free will and the mystery of God with the historical national experience, Lithuanian poetry emphasizes the primacy of the internal (moral and spiritual) sphere of the individual and the nation in the contexts of the occupations and genocide of the nation. The external cause of the nation's suffering (aggression of a foreign state) is obvious, but literary self-reflection also seeks deeper reasons for the loss of freedom (the metaphor of a child's walking frame in the poem *God's Birch and Grace* of Antanas Baranauskas), and more mature forms of religiosity (the reflection of individual freedom and responsibility in the poetry of Antanas Miškinis and Almis Grybauskas).

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