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GLOBALIZATION CHALLENGES THE NATIONAL LITERARY HISTORY

The topic of this paper was suggested by two contradictory facts. The first is the work schedule of the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, which is oriented towards the Lithuanian national literature. I am going to focus on the volumes of Lithuanian literary history devoted to the 19th and 20th centuries by Vytautas Kubilius and Juozas Girdzijauskas. These works will be perceived as the most significant examples of all the studies of the modern Lithuanian literature written to this day. The second factor is the growing scepticism towards histories of national literatures in western academic circles. The collection of articles by prominent scholars *Rethinking Literary History*¹ published by Oxford University Press in 2002 serves as a good example of this. To a greater or lesser extent all the authors interpret the issue of writing histories of national literatures as an outdated phenomenon.

The aim of this paper is to discuss two questions suggested by the opponents of national literature.

IS THE HISTORY OF NATIONAL LITERATURE STILL NEEDED?

The opponents of national literatures suggest that the idea of nations and national literature is an historical phenomenon that flourished in the 19th century and is withering in the 21st. Romanticist and positivist ideologies of the 19th century inspired all the largest Western European nations to create their literary histories. Consequently, those extensive academic volumes served as examples to literary scholars from the “periphery” of Europe, suffering from different occupa-

¹ *Rethinking Literary History*, ed. by Linda Hutcheon, Mario J. Valdes, Oxford University Press, 2002.

tions, which lead to abnormal cultural conditions unable to produce such histories. Currently, the trend of national literary history is clearly migrating from the centre to the periphery of Europe. This process is simultaneous with the national liberation and the growth of the national identity in East-European countries. Nations that restored the independence a decade ago should go through the period of rewriting national literary histories in order to consolidate on the basis of the common literary tradition, values of the past, cultural particularity and the common language. One has to agree with the opponents in the sense that the political and patriotic motives rather than methodological or aesthetic ones decided on the manner of the initiation of the latest histories of the Lithuanian literature. "The public of the independent Lithuania is waiting for unfalsified exposure of artistic values and the objective history of their formation"²; or even more straightforward, "The criterion of truth had to be the nation – the interests of developing the national culture"³. The national ideology, the exposure and canonisation of the national literary values were the fundamental reasons for the new histories of Lithuanian literature to appear.

The opponents suggest that writing national histories is the strategy of reinforcing the national power and call it the outdated idealism that does not correspond to the integration processes of the contemporary world. The new electronic media, mass culture, multinational capitalism, and diasporic hybridity demands "rethinking our literary historical habits of mind in an attempt to avoid the kind of essentializing and stereotyping sectarian thinking that has buttressed those nationalist conceptions of single ethnic identity that have contributed to the eruption of conflicts the world over"⁴.

The theoretician of New Historicism, Greenblatt, radically criticises histories of national literatures by calling them an expression of national essentialism and the great narrative that overshadows the polypphony of culture and the so-called marginal phenomena⁵. Furthermore, he sees the national consciousness, national memory, national values and similar notions as comfortable clichés devised by the romantics

² Vytautas Kubilius, *XX amžiaus lietuvių literatūra*, Vilnius: Alma litera, 1995, p. 9.

³ *Lietuvių literatūros istorija: XIX amžius*, Vilnius: LLTI leidykla, p.xi.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, „Rethinking the National Model“, *Rethinking Literary History*, p. 3–4.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Racial Memory and Literary History*, in: *Rethinking Literary History*, p. 53.

and referring to something that do not-exist⁶. He sees a nation as an historical phenomenon that was turned into a myth and granted the status of the eternal value by the romantics. Thus, national histories are not more than fables in his view. He maintains that the image of the national history that Lithuanians are trying to create at the moment, and which he encountered during his visit in Vilnius in 1997, is the latest version of this fable. He was surprised at the sight of new cultural signs giving meaning to the Lithuanian past of the city as he could trace almost no homage paid to the Jewish heritage (forty percent of the population of Vilnius before the Second World War was Jewish, Lithuanians being a distinct minority). Greenblatt was shocked to see the sculpture of Žemaitė in one of Vilnius courtyards, because according to him her biggest merit was the fact that she learned Lithuanian by playing with her peasant neighbors children and consequently wrote several short stories in Lithuanian, but not in Polish. Based on his personal experiences in Vilnius he makes a radical generalization that writing the history of the national literature in Lithuania and other Baltic states is not only the expression of nostalgia, but also the ideological strategy, an attempt to establish a nation at the expense of other nations, to express the national power, an act, which buries as many historical facts as it claims to revive⁷.

He holds that models of national culture narratives based on the illusion of national community identity have to be replaced by different histories (i.e. small narratives), dealing with marginal problems and critical reconsideration of history. Conceptions of unified identity justified by the essentialist and stereotypical thinking give rise not only to literary histories or cultural thriving, but to national conflicts too. His understands that pulling down idols / authorities might cause the strongest and most emotional attack on the part of the patriots, but does it not underlie how dangerous nationalism can be in setting nations against each other and leading to horrific massacre such as in Sarajevo?

The professor of English and Comparative Literature Department at the University of Toronto, Linda Hutcheon, sees national literatures as a relic of the Romantic period, too. She maintains that the research of national literatures historical narratives reveal the fact that their

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.57.

central value is the nation. Homogeneous and evolutionary narratives of national literary histories are bound to undermine inconvenient, disruptive facts of culture and the feminist and Marxist literary histories have aptly exposed this. However they are also trapped in the vicious circle of one-sided interpretations of facts. In this era of post-existentialism, post-structuralism and globalisation histories reconsidering national values are intellectually and ideologically bankrupt.⁸

Hutcheon does not only criticise the popularity of national literatures in the newly liberated societies, but tries to understand and explain them with the help of the psychoanalytical notion of traumatic memory. She argues that literary histories in these societies function as a compensation for the restrictions and intellectual as well as psychological traumas suffered at the time of occupation. Damages inflicted by empires, in the same way as holocaust, daunt societies for a long time. The suffering of a nation causes repetitive references to and analysis of traumatic experiences. Writers traumatised by the occupation need to testify the literary history, to tell “what it was really like” in order to save themselves and their national communities from the suffering of the past⁹.

„How does one gain access to the traumatic history? The answer seems to be that, either as an individual or as a community, one tells one’s story.“¹⁰. The original trauma becomes transformed into a narrative memory and the impact of the occupation on the national culture is publicly acknowledged. The function of literary histories is to restore the distorted truth. However, it is equally important to realise that one should deal with the state of the traumatic memory as soon as possible and leave the painful reflections in the past. First, traumatic memory interferes with the process of thinking and restricts considering history in a comprehensive, analytical and critical way. Traumatic memory produces romantic narratives about a suffering nation and its sacred culture. Second, it makes impossible adequate reflections

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁹ „Since the first steps of the literary career “the teacher” was the most frequently attacked and accused person by Soviet ideologists. He has been repeatedly denied the right to publish his articles in the press, the Central Committee forbade him to seek the Doctor’s Degree for seven years”, writes Vanda Zaborskaitė about the author of *20th Century Lithuanian Literature* in Vanda Zaborskaitė, „Kaip rašyti literatūros istoriją?“ (*How to Write Literary History?*), in: *Lietuvos aidas*, 22 December 1995.

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p.21.

on the problems of the contemporary world, in which the status of a national literary history is degrading¹¹.

The focus on single ethnicity and single language in the national model of literary history have come under criticism from various schools of thought as well as from the globalized reality of today's diasporic demographics. Expanding multicultural events and growing migration denies the territorial homogeneity of any national culture. Very soon communities or individuals unwilling to associate with the present Lithuanian literary history and declaring the cultural difference and independence of their identity might emerge in contemporary Lithuanian society. Thus, many scholars believe that it is crucial to abandon national literature models for the sake of pluralistic cultural ones that would constitute an opposition to the idea of cultural purity and that would be replaced by international comparative culture studies¹². Literary historians should not limit themselves to the 19th century idea of national unity, but rather turn to the "others" and acknowledge the multicultural reality. Multicultural literary research denies the national homogeneity, but not the nationality itself. The interactions between local and global facts of literature is the main object of multicultural history.

What does the idea of linguistic or ethnic purity, suggested by the model of national literature, mean today, when throughout the history we observe the intermingling of nations, cultures and languages? Therefore, it is not surprising that Lithuanian literary history of the inter-war period marginalised everything that was not purely Lithuanian. This practice resulted in creating the myth of the bucolic Lithuanian national culture. Up to now we have failed to produce a historical judgement of the multicultural heritage of the united Lithuanian Polish State and the Romantic School of Vilnius. All the greatest 19th century personalities (Mickiewicz, Narbutas, Valančius, Baranauskas etc.) are to be interpreted in the new, multicultural way. The multicultural literary research denies the national homogeneity, but not nationality itself. The main object of it is the interactions of the local and global phenomena.

Some conclusions may be drawn from this dispute. First, the dispute is carried out by unequal partners, i.e. by the non-traumatized and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

well-established nations and the traumatised ones that are currently performing the act of self-establishment. The unequal economic and cultural position of the partners decides their unequal point of view towards national literatures. It is impossible to judge which parties are right as both of them are correct from the point of view of their respective cultural circumstances. I only have one choice, which is the fate of my own, Lithuanian culture with Kubilius' and Girdzijauskas' literary histories. I hope that pluralist and liberalist ideologists will manage to tolerate "others" and leave some room for their existence without putting all the cultures under the single umbrella of exceptionally well funded multi-cultural study programmes.

The national literatures ensure the memory stability, and preservation of the cultural heritage. On the other hand, they are constantly reinvented and written from the perspective of the unstable and future oriented present perspective that demands the eradication of former idols. The evolving present and the nation's historical circumstances require new forms of identification, vitality of thought and cultural development. The tradition is not only *remembered, preserved and established*, it is also *created*. For this reason the integration of the national literary to the multicultural studies is inescapable.

WHAT HISTORY DO WE NEED

Nobody seems to question the role of history as an important developer of human memory and consciousness. The only question arises – in what way and what kind of consciousness it is capable to develop. Thus, the methodological issue as to how literary histories should be written or in what way the old narratives should be reshaped is topical today.

The problem of methodological shift is tackled in hundreds of books throughout the whole of the 20th century. Numerous scholars still consider Rene Wellek's and Austin Warren's idea: "literary history has a future as well as a past, a future which cannot and should not consist merely in filling gaps in the scheme discovered by older methods. We must seek to elaborate anew ideal of literary history and new methods which would make its realization possible"¹³. Three significant

¹³ Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, Harcourt, Brace, 1956. p. 268.

cases of the “death” of literary history followed by three “resurrections” can be singled out: the hermeneutic (Dilthey), the phenomenological (Staiger), and the post-modernist (Foucault). Each of them condemned the paradigmatic model of literary history subsequently enriching it with creative paradox. This paper will focus only on several noticeably outdated methodological issues used in histories of Lithuanian literature.

One has to admit that even the latest Lithuanian literary histories are written according to the 19th century methodology based on the Romantic ideas of patriotism, ethnic purity and uniqueness, as well as the positivist idea of historic objectivity.

Lithuanian literary histories highlight their attempt to achieve scientific objectivity. Their authors, like loyal Ranke’s followers, aim at understanding a historic epoch with its own devices, i.e. using the “real” facts. They rule out any possibility of subjectivity, ideology or interpretation: “My objective was to make people of the time speak rather than their later judges and critics <...> an attempt was made to try and understand each author with the highest level of precision”¹⁴. Written in the style of realistic prose, those histories create the illusion of objectivity. The impression is, that literature tells its story itself. This supposedly scientific historic narrative has been condemned to be the worst by such theorists as Althusser, Barthes, White, Gadamer, Jauss, Foucault etc. Today the belief that history could be written in “innocent” scientific style and the illusion that described objects can exist independently from the consciousness of the writing subject look, to put it mildly, strange. According to Gadamer’s phenomenological remarks, the understanding of history cannot be pure, without any preconceptions, unless they are consciously ignored: “the real historical thinking is forced to consider its own historicity”¹⁵. The recognition that the object of historical cognition is constructed by the subject has still the worst reputation in Lithuanian historiography and has not been analytically conceived or accepted. Mario J. Valdes believes that under the influence of phenomenology and hermeneutics contemporary scholars agree that writing literary history is a dialectic and dialogic act of cognition, decided not only by the object in question but

¹⁴ J. Girdzijauskas, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Apie supratimo ratą*, in: H-G. Gadamer, *Istorija, menas, kalba*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1999, p. 34.

also by the chosen methodological approach. Contemporary history is written from the *double perspective*: historical data match with the outlook of a contemporary writer, with the interpreted and remodelled history¹⁶. As an historic message, literary text has its own historic context that needs to be researched. But today it seems na_ve to declare historic objectivity without declaring or taking into account the methodological approach and the role of aesthetics interpretation in it.

Declaring this scientific objectivity national literary histories focus on the issues of the national identity. These issues should be considered in a conscious and analytical way rather than “taken for granted”. When histories claim to aim at “scientific objectivity” and “presenting the undistorted truth about Lithuanian literature”, where “the main criterion of truth is the nation”, from the methodological point of view it is a step back not to even to Ranke’s but rather to the Germany of Herder’s times. After phenomenology lessons, nothing should be “taken for granted”. Because anything that comes across as unmotivated is most subject to harsh comments by any young philologist who happened to have read a little too much of Greenblatt’s critique towards the reactionary nature of nationalism. V. Kubilius’ history is written according to the canons of traditional narrative with the attempt to “bring forward” the balance of literary development. However, the afore mentioned methodological problems are implied in his text. Thus the narrative undertakes a more modern and softer tone (“I made an effort to “bring forward” the balance of literary development, which cannot be complete and might be subjective”¹⁷). This type of narrative strategy cannot be said to be characteristic of the 19th century history (“Lietuvių literatūros istorija: XIX amžius”).

Furthermore, the narrative strategy inherited from the 19th century literary histories have many other features that Lithuanian philologists find appealing. It allows them to reveal the natural development of the Lithuanian nation in a rational way, to expose the causes and effects of this development, to exhibit the organic unity of facts and events, and finally to suggest the idea of constant evolution of Lithuanian literature starting with early sporadic texts and arriving at the contemporary cultural flourishmant as well as to make a canon of Lithuanian culture authorities.

¹⁶ Mario J. Valdes, *Rethinking the History of Literary History*, in: *Rethinking Literary History*, p. 57.

¹⁷ Vytautas Kubilius, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

The latest Lithuanian literary histories of the 19th and 20th centuries read: “My wish was to maintain the most coherent understanding of the 19th century Lithuanian spiritual culture, its development and evolution and to avoid logical contradictions” (Girdzijauskas); “This history is designed to present the perspective of literary development from the first rudiments to the multifaceted branching out of the 20th century <...> Lithuanian literature of the 20th century is seen as a coherent process enjoying inner logic <...> literature of the exile is interpreted as an inherent part of the whole” (Kubilius). When the author is burning with patriotic aspirations and suffers from the former Marxist vulgarisation of Lithuanian literature, he is unable to write polemically and critically and refuses to do so. “In this book we look at the 19th century giants with our heads up” (Girdzijauskas); “only the writers whose work most characteristically (conspicuously) embodied the central trends are portrayed” (Kubilius). Lithuanian literary histories are out of date of representing writers as “metaphoric, symbolic culture figures, eloquently representing their époques”¹⁸ rather than human beings.

Such narrative models have been badly criticised in the post-structuralist historiography affected by psychoanalysis as the expression of teleological, rationalist, progressive, essentialist, organist and stereotypical thinking. To put it shortly and clearly, they are called the vulgar Hegelianism¹⁹.

M. Foucault and other post-structuralists deconstruct the so-called scientific thinking. They bring out the wrong side of things ousted by historical processes. They analyse the irrational twists, epistemological breaks, coincidences and contradictions of facts, moments of the unconscious, unfulfilled actions, and different mistakes. Contemporary narratives break and fragment the organic and evolutionary line of development discarding the role of the omniscient narrator.

They perceive both past and present as neither rational, not causative. Biographies make their characters’ lives emphatically scandalous. Very often the fictional way of portraying historic events and personalities is replaced by the most important historic personalities, i.e. texts. History is perceived as a continuous and perpetual process of rew-

¹⁸ A. Žentelytė, „XIX amžiaus lietuvių literatūra“ (*19th Century Lithuanian Literature*), in: *Šviesa*, 2001, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Rethinking Literary History*, p. 33.

riting the existing narratives. The canonisation of writers is also considered an ill practice disguising the secret wish of power. Facts are treated in a critical way by striking polemical discussions with the existing historic interpretations, a more pluralistic view of the past is sought after, the relations between the elite and mass literatures are established. We can see the process that violently bridges aesthetic and political, local and global facts, the Home and the World. A New History of French Literature (ed. by Denis Hollier)²⁰ based on hermeneutic, phenomenological, and post-modern methodological principles as well as those used by the school of Annales is good examples of the changes that are under way.

Historical deconstructions offered by New Historians rely on the nihilistic world view and demonstrative exploitation of criticism. They might not appeal to everyone, but they make it impossible to depict the past in Hegelian terms. They also make it difficult to believe in the apocalyptic objectivity declared by traditional historians, who, according to Foucault, still believe in life after death, the eternal values and the consciousness of their own identity.

Traditional positivist literary history does not only suffer the aggressive deconstruction perpetrated by New Historicism, but it is also renovated by the aesthetics of reception, that enriches the former with the phenomenology of interpretation²¹. Hermeneutics suggest a dialogical relation with history, which is based both on the dialectic autonomy of the text and its historic contextuality.

The monologist memory is replaced by the dialogic and interpretative memory, while existentially liberated rethinking of the history engages in a polemical discussion with the dogmatic and devalued images of the past.

Let us take a short look at Ricoeur's efforts to reveal the structural similarity of time and narrative in the study *Time and Narrative*²² that has crucially influenced the writing of contemporary histories. Lives, in the same way as historic facts or events, do not sink into forgetfulness and silence because they are preserved in the form of narratives. Human beings shape their experience of time and give meaning to it

²⁰ *A New History of French Literature*, (ed. Denis Hollier), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989;

²¹ Mario J. Valdes, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

by way of producing historical narratives. Ricoeur states that two features are characteristic of historic narratives whose referent is human time. First, historical narrative has a double reference. Second, it is defined by *continuity* and *meaningfulness*, as the time in which the narrative unfolds is understood as organised and meaningful. The double reference means that narratives are designed not only to inform about historical facts and events but also to explain, interpret, symbolise and mythologize them.

The narrative does not reflect the time of the past in a passive way but rather constructs orders and gives meaning to it. The old literature is interpreted today, thus, it cannot be the real past, free from the aesthetic or ideological experience of the interpreter. On the basis of this “double” understanding of history (research of historical facts is concrete and scholarly but not the style of the narrative) Ricoeur claims that historic narrative can be described as realistically symbolic style²³. This is to say that the historic narrative seeks to recreate facts in the most realistic way, but linguistic recreation or repetition of facts is always symbolic.

The narrative informs and explains/ deforms/ symbolises at the same time. Recounting historical events means symbolising them by means of language. The narrative grants separate events and the life as a whole with symbolic meanings. The objective of history is not so much scientifically positivist (to analyse in to an époque with its own devices) but rather philosophically interpretative, aiming at highlighting what was meaningful in it and what could not have been carried out by the personalities of the époque. Historical narrative is constructed as a narrative about narratives, as an interpretation of an interpretation.

Creation the meanings by plots, symbolising facts of life by narratives interest Ricoeur as an existential, hermeneutic and semiotic rather than ideological act. The expression of a narrative and imagination that produces the narrative cannot be reduced to ideological motives. The need to narrate is born with the need for religion and mythology. Existential thinking clearly separates Ricoeur from the concept of the New Historicism forged by Foucault as well as from the deconstructionist and nihilistic interpretations. Ricoeur believes that creating meaning of life by way of narratives is a dramatic and heroic human resistance to the destructive power of time, the feast of human consciousness in the darkness of existence. Human existence is the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 104–120.

greatest and most important mystery that requires constant attempts to solve it, i.e. narratives. Existential understanding of interpreting and writing history makes the models positivist of national histories insufficient and requires a problematic approach. Literature and literary history should be perceived as the centre of a speaking society and as the greatest instrument helping the society to understand its past, the surrounding world and its present self.

Contemporary scholar cannot ignore the criticism voiced by phenomenologist, hermeneutist, and post-structuralises, shut himself in the silence of his office and carry on with the sacred 19th century narrative of the national literature. He has to enter the polemical battle for the possibility of his vision of the past, to risk recounting a different history in a different way in order to provoke his contemporaries, to disturb their imagination and heart. However, provocative history should not come across as an attempt to keep up with the fashions of the day but rather as a talented absolute ear, registering every vibration of the human thought and the growing plurality of self-identification. So far writers (Nyka-Niliūnas, Sigitas Geda etc.) have done the best job reinterpreting Lithuanian literature.

Contemporary literary scholars acknowledge that expanding globalisation (e.g. the distribution of the capital, new investments, the arrival of new work force, access to translation programmes, the growth of tourism, and the boom of commercial entertainment culture) requires to change the stereotype of presenting national literature. This can be done in two ways: by reinforcing critical self-reflection and the awareness of multicultural present. One cannot avoid the processes of globalisation, thus, one has to be able to accept them in a reasonable way. Greenblatt compares a patriotic historian petrified at the prospect of the polyphonic state of culture to a 17th century etymologist grieving over the fact that his native English is contaminated with foreign words. Both their reflections are futile. It was Shakespeare's works that turned out to be fruitful and they emerged at the same time as the grief of the etymologist and were the first hand products of the "contaminated language". Greenblatt holds that the cycle of history is repeating itself. Now the new etymologists defend Shakespeare and the purity of their national literatures from the threat posed by new multiculturalism.

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