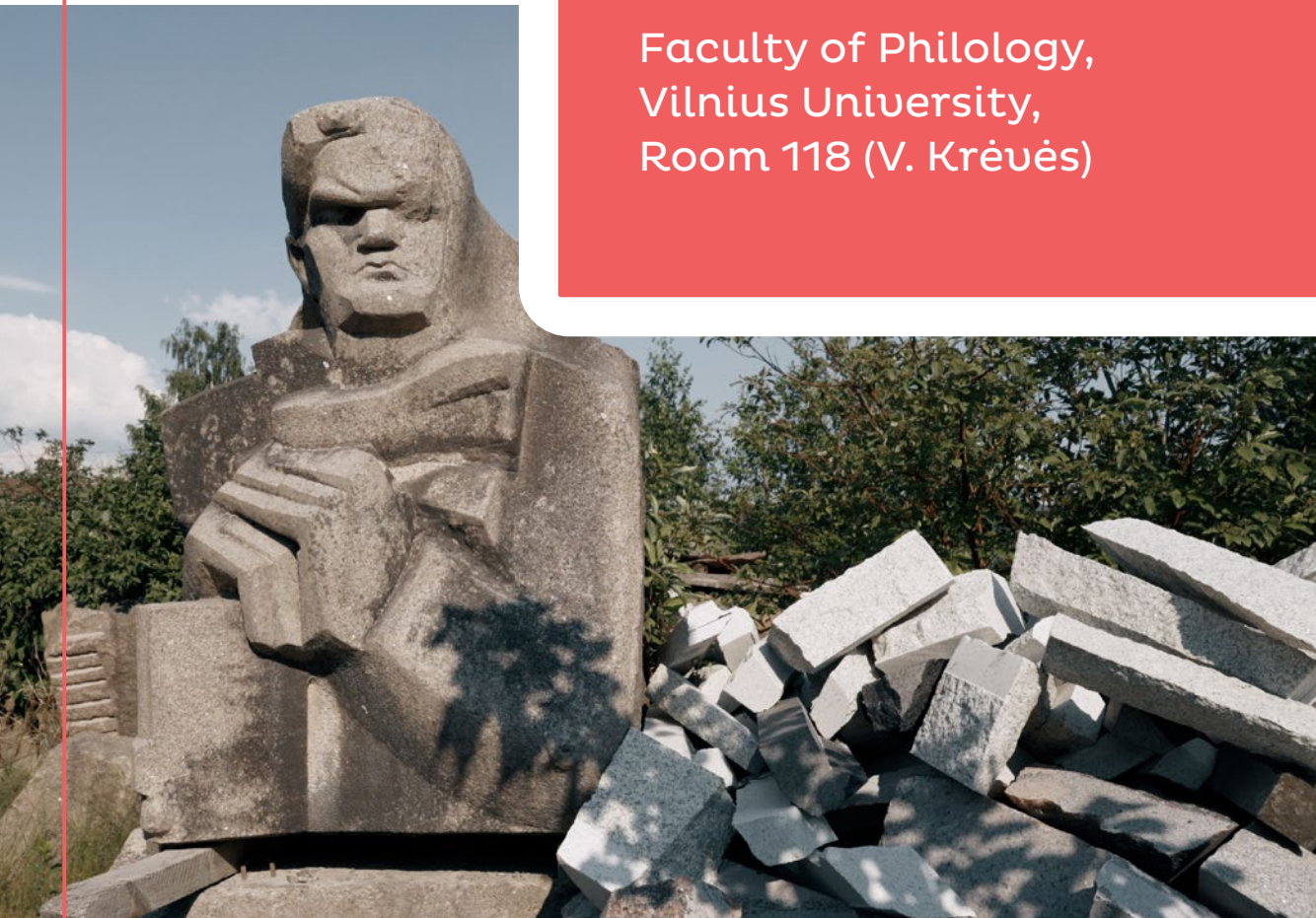


Literary Canon Revision in Post-Communist Societies

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CONFERENCE PAPER ABSTRACTS



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■ Evgeny Dobrenko

(Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Literary Canons Are All Alike; Every De-Canonized Literature is De-Canonized in its Own Way: Post-Communist De-Canonization as a Literary Strategy

Post-communist de-canonization began simultaneously with the process of postmodernist de-canonization in the 1980s and 1990s. Although these processes proceeded on very different levels—political (post-communist de-canonization), ethnic (destruction of imperial canons, interest in ethnic minority cultures), racial (de-colonization), gender (feminist de-canonization, culture of sexual minorities), social (removal of hierarchies), aesthetic (postmodernism), methodological (poststructuralism), etc.—they turned out to be connected in time. This has led to a revision not only and not even so much of cultural canons, but to a revision of our understanding of the nature of culture. This paper focuses on transformation of post-communist Russian literature into new Russian literature; i.e. it traces strategies of de-canonization as literary strategies per se. It explores how the discourses and codes of Socialist Realism (and of totalitarian culture as a whole) are preserved and transformed in post-Soviet literature. The question of post-Soviet literature's relationship to the Soviet cultural legacy is extremely important, since this is essentially the question of how far post-Soviet society diverges from Soviet models of culture, history, progress, etc.: does it transcend them, or does it remain their prisoner? The author suggests an unexpected answer to this question: dependence on “the Soviet” does not diminish, but in fact grows during the post-Soviet period. This conclusion is evidenced by the evolution of literary forms, which recycle Socialist Realist tropes and rhetoric: from 1990s Sots Art, which satirically deconstructs Socialist Realism, to the contemporary mainstream that “normalizes” Soviet codes.

■ Dalia Satkauskytė

(Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore)

The Biography of the Writer as a Factor in (De)Canonization

Despite the concept of the death of the author, popular in the second half of the twentieth century, and the understanding of the literary canon as primarily a list of texts, the biography of the author always intervenes indirectly in the process of canonization. It occurs either *a priori*, as an additional argument for canonization (e.g., participation in a national movement), or *a posteriori*, when the canonized author acquires, according to Jurij Lotman, the right to a biography, even if the writer himself theoretically supports the idea of an author's death (as in the case of the Lithuanian poet Henrikas Radauskas). However, biography becomes a very important factor in cases of revision and rewriting of the canon, especially when it is related to political changes in society; e.g. in the process of the formation of the Socialist Realist canon or the case of its radical deconstruction. In this paper, I will discuss the argument of biography used in the current debates on the status of Soviet-era writers in the Lithuanian literary canon, Salomėja Nėris and Petras Cvirka in particular. I assume that the model of the (non)separation of author and text proposed by Western literary sociologists (e.g. the representation/apologetics distinction proposed by Gisèle Sapiro) is not always appropriate for post-Soviet literatures, and I will try to consider how it can be supplemented or modified.

■ **Olga Bartosiewicz-Nikolaev**

(Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Science)

Revision of the Legend of *Meșterul Manole* (The Craftsman Manole) and the Myth of the 'Immured woman' in Post-Communist Romanian Literary and Cultural Discourse

Meșterul Manole (The Craftsman Manole) is considered by canonical literary critics (e.g. George Călinescu) to be one of the fundamental myths of Romanian spirituality and identity. It implements the theme of the 'immured/sacrificed woman', widely reported throughout the Balkans. It was published in ballad form by Vasile Alecsandri in 1852, becoming immediately an important part of the Romanian literary and cultural canon. My presentation will focus on the ideological shift after 1989 that determined the appearance of the debates over the role of Ana, the female character of the ballad, and *her* sacrifice. Until 1989, her perspective was widely ignored, because the canonical interpretation of the legend (present in the educational system, literature and culture for decades) emphasized the male perspective of Manole and *his* sacrifice for the act of creation (cf. Mircea Eliade). After 1989, feminist discourse (e.g. Mihaela Miroiu) argues that the symbolic structures perpetuated by this myth influenced the formation of the female ideal in Romanian communist and post-communist society, culture and literature; hence, the new canon should revise these views, paying attention to/changing the position of women in the patriarchal system.

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■ **Solveiga Daugirdaitė**

(Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore)

The Post-Soviet Lithuanian Literary Canon from a Gender Perspective

This presentation is devoted to the change of the canon in the post-Soviet period. The gender aspect is understood in two ways: as the visibility of women's work in the canon, and as the image of femininity created by the literary canon. Both meanings are linked. Briefly, this change has been and continues to take place without a broader debate among intellectuals, literary specialists, and literature teachers. The authors of pro-Soviet ideology who came to literature in the earlier post-war decades were replaced by younger authors of a more modern expression who debuted in the 1970s and 1980s. Some post-war diaspora authors were included in school curricula, and authors with a realistic outlook from various periods were replaced by authors with a more metaphysical bent. However, one gender aspect of the canon has not changed substantially: the work of women authors remains marginal (for example, of the 36 authors currently required for the state Lithuanian language and literature examination only 3 from the XVI century to the present day are women). If we take the view that the canon is a matter of social agreement, and that it is usually imposed on weaker groups by more powerful groups, then women should be considered to be a defeated group in contemporary Lithuanian culture. However, this is not the case in reality, which means that it must be assumed that gender was not considered in the creation of the canon. The report discusses how the community of readers compensates for the apparent gender imbalance in the Lithuanian literary canon.

■ **Judit Dobry**
(Independent researcher)

Mosaics of Time Long Past

The focus here will be on the possibilities of rebuilding 20th-century-Central European history in the 21st-century Hungarian prose work *Nova* by Gábor Kálmán, a Hungarian author born in former Czechoslovakia. In this work, the objectivity of historical events was replaced with subjective memories that are connected to specific *lieux de mémoire*. *Nova* captures the so-called “small history” of a particular territory under a communist regime that comes to life through the collective memory of its inhabitants. The (hi)story of Jasná Horka and the whole region is reimagined, rebuilt, and reinterpreted by the author as well as by readers. In the case of Kálmán’s prose, published in 2011, parallels can be drawn with works of Hungarian novelists (e. g. Esterházy, Nádas, Hajnóczy, Grendel, etc.). Their work is characterized by the use of postmodern techniques already in the last decades of the communist regime (the so-called “Prose-turn”). The comparison also applies to works created in the early post-communist period (The Sinistra Zone by Ádám Bodor). Due to its unique approach, Kálmán’s prose became a part of the revisited post-communist literary canon.

■ **Magdalena Garbacik-Balakowicz**
(Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute for Literary Studies)

Sándor Márai – from *Persona Non Grata* to Canonical Writer

The question of the reinterpretations of Sándor Márai’s (1900–1989) work throughout his career and posthumously is the focus of this paper. In the 1930s and 1940s, Márai’s work was acclaimed by critics and readers in Hungary. His position in the canon of Hungarian literature seemed assured. The situation changed after World War II when the communists came to power and the author decided to emigrate. He continued to write and published several novels and diaries in exile, yet in his homeland his books were banned. For over 40 years, several generations have grown up without knowing his name. It was not until the 1990s that his work was rediscovered, rehabilitated, and achieved international success. Even with the incredible posthumous comeback, there is still no consensus in Hungary about his work and despite being included in the canon, it is not clear exactly what place should be given to it. The paper deals with this issue, points out the main aspects which have affected different interpretations of his work as well as outlines the reasons behind objections to his oeuvre. The analysis indicates social, political and historical conditions affecting the reception of Márai’s work in the course of the 20th century and at the present time.

■ Csaba Horváth

(Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary)

Different Directions. The Diverging Canons of Hungarian Education and Literature in the Last Decade

Contemporary Hungarian literature and official literary policy of the last decades appear to be moving in opposite directions. After the failure of communism, a new generation appeared in Hungarian literature. They wrote the first remarkable works around the millennium. These writers (Krisztina Tóth, György Dragomán, Attila Bartis, and others) had grown up reading authors like Imre Kertész, Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, but they extended and renewed this heritage. For them the postmodern was no longer a goal to reach, but a starting point to run from. Their most remarkable innovation was the re-building of reality in literary texts: the representation of reality and the internal logic of language have not been considered a contradiction. The text creates, holds, and represents reality at the same time. Based on the new concept of reality and language, these texts have changed the literary canon, making the literature more public-friendly, understandable, and direct by means of plots, motifs, and narrative structures of the books.

■ Przemysław Kordos

(University of Warsaw)

Greece: Persisting Nostalgia for Communism

Eventually Greece was not incorporated into the Soviet Bloc and the beaten Communist partisans were forced to leave or to remain silent, and obedient. Nevertheless, contemporary Greek culture is permeated by nostalgia for Communism by the thought: how would it have been, if we had shared Communist dogma with our northern neighbors? In Greece there is no 1989 milestone, but there is another transformation, that of 1974, when the ultra-rightist junta fell and the leftist political scene was finally un-gagged. Since then the Communist sentiments—expressed through ideology, motifs, aesthetics—have been present in public life and in the literary canon. I would like to—cursorily—examine it through the figure of a woman. Suspiciously often, women are depicted as if they came from Communist times: working-class, efficient, belligerent, with the stress put on their usefulness towards society and not on their beauty, nor other personal traits. My material would be literary texts, from 1974 to 2020 as well as auxiliary sources such as artistic depictions (monuments etc.), also some older texts, like that about the immured wife, in the folk song “The Bridge of Arta.”

■ Aistė Kučinskienė

(Vilnius University and Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore),

Viktorija Šeina

(Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore),

Saulius Vasiliauskas

(Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore)

Canonical Soviet Authors in the Post-Soviet Lithuanian School: the Cases of Cvirka and Nėris

According to John Guillory's theory of the literary canon as symbolic capital, schools are the main institution that spread the canon in the society. School curricula and didactic material not only shape students' knowledge about the authors in the canon, but also offer canonical interpretations of their biographies and works. In this paper, the cases of Petras Cvirka and Salomėja Nėris are chosen as eminent to reveal and discuss the shifts in the school literary canon after the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania (1990).

The puppet government of the Lithuanian SSR (established in 1940) rushed to reform the Lithuanian language and the literature curriculum. Due to the lack of quality Socialist Realist literature, it was necessary to "create" canonical authors from left-wing avant-garde writers from the 1930s: Nėris was selected as a crucial poet and Cvirka as leading in prose fiction. After the second Soviet occupation (1944), their importance even increased. When the state of Lithuania was re-established, debates about their position in the canon escalated. Nonetheless, Nėris was never removed from school curricula, although the principles of interpretation of her poetry changed. The works of Cvirka remained only in primary school use, hence nowadays he is understood as a children's author.

■ Antonela Marić, Ana Ćosić

(University of Split)

From the Post-Communist to the Pseudo-Democratic Mindset: Collective Amnesia vs. Collective Memory

After the Homeland war for Croatian independence, there has been a political and ideological shift in the literary canon. Literary classics, privileged before the 1990s, were almost completely ignored by the post-communist mindset, frequently covered up by the enthusiasm for the newly discovered patriotism.

The slow but persistent transformation of such a literary practice started in the early 2000s, when a number of then relatively young and now successful Croatian-Mediterranean authors, like Ante Tomić, Ivica Ivanišević, Jurica Pavičić, Renato Baretić, etc., using narratives enveloped by a subtle, refined humor, tried to influence the canon by reopening some of the unpopular topics. They tackled issues like: the switch from the post-communist to the pseudo-democratic mindset, hypocrisy of some newly established political elites, collective and individual amnesias, the relationship between the state and the church, minorities' issues, etc. The focus of this paper will be on investigating the extent of influence that the aforementioned authors exercised on the post-war literary canon, whereas particular attention will be paid to the literary work of Jurica Pavičić, and his internationally awarded fiction.

■ Viliam Nádaskay

(Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences)

From Canon to Periphery. Notes on Socially Engaged Poetry in Post-Communist Slovakia

During the Normalization period in socialist Czechoslovakia (1969–1989), social engagement of official, canonical literature was one of the key demands of the Communist Party's cultural policies. In Slovak literature, this demand resulted in authors focusing on a stable set of topics: commentary on ongoing world events, critique of modern consumerist lifestyle, seminal events and personalities of national history, and scarce returns to 1950s Socialist Realist imagery. After Czechoslovakia shifted towards liberal democracy and was divided, literary criticism perceived literature as radically discarding all expressions of social engagement. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of political writing and Jonathan Culler's theory of lyric forms and functions, this paper aims to examine the (dis)continuity of engaged poetry from the communist to the post-communist era. Based on the analysis of 1990s Slovak poetry, its critical response and retrospective evaluation of pre-1989 engaged poetry, the paper argues that socially engaged poetry was alive during the 1990s, only in different form, and that as a relatively distinct genre it moved from the canonical centre of the literary field to its periphery—or, in conjunction with Theodor Adorno's description of literary engagement, from affirmation of the status quo to its opposition.

■ Maciej Olszewski

(The Anthropos Doctoral School and Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences)

The Noble Witch Reflected in Different Mirrors. Transformation of the Motif of Veronika of Desenice in Slovenian Culture

The fate of Veronika of Desenice—a medieval gentlewoman tried (and acquitted) in the first witchcraft trial on Slovenian soil—was an inspiration for Slovenian folklore and culture since the 15th century, becoming with time one of the most iconic motifs in this culture. In the modern era (its beginning in Slovenia dates back to 1848), more than 25 texts of various genres were produced; e.g. dramas, operas and novels. In my presentation, I show how Veronika's motif was used in modern texts and how the narration related to it changed over time (e.g. how the focus on different aspects of the story and the ways it was told were changing). Around half of these texts came into existence before the Second World War, around five during communist Yugoslavia, and the rest in the era of independent Slovenia. Some of them were written by authors in exile. Based on this material, similarities and differences in ways of writing about Veronika of Desenice in changing circumstances with a stress on works from the communist and independent Slovenia eras will be presented.

■ **Gitana Vanagaitė**

(Vytautas Magnus University and Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore)

The Avant-Garde of the Early Twentieth Century in the Canon of Soviet and Post-Soviet Lithuanian Literature

A canon appears as a sign of literary maturity, when a literature recognizes itself in certain rules and models. It is in this fashion that literature aims to define these modes and features, so it can coherently develop according to them. Avant-garde movements have always been seen as being in opposition to the canon, as its contestation, so they were considered more anti-canonical than canonical. It is also true that the question whether the avant-garde has a canon or is just a poetic movement is not so easy to answer as it may seem.

Italian Futurism, which marked the beginning of European avant-garde movements, had relatively close relations with politics: Filippo Marinetti supported fascism, glorified war and violence in his manifestos. In general, the European avant-garde emerged not only as an artistic or literary movement, but more often as resistance to bourgeois ideology, so politics was always an obvious aspect of these movements.

The role of the Lithuanian avant-garde movements (“Four Winds” and “Third Front”) will be reviewed in this paper in order to establish the place of the ideologically Marxist “Third Front” movement in the canon of Soviet Lithuanian literature and to describe what has changed in the post-Soviet years.

■ **Beatrix Visy**

(Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute for Literary Studies)

Locked in The Ivory Tower

Mihály Babits is one of the most eminent creative minds of the first half of the 20th century in Hungary. As a poet, he contributed to one of the most significant journals in modern Hungarian literature, the *Nyugat* (meaning The West (1908–1941)) from the beginning, and went on to become the editor of the review from 1929 until his death. His role in poetic literary life was inevitable in his era. The bourgeois, Catholic artist, who represented high aesthetic values and the modern Western spirit, could not be completely eliminated even by the communist power, but his works were not published after the “revolutionary year” (1948). His poetry was claimed to be exceedingly complex, philosophical, and incomprehensible which led him to be labelled by stereotypical qualities, such as “poeta doctus” and the “poet of the ivory tower.” After 1956, Babits was also affected by the relative easing of the Kádár era, and some of his work could be published, but the real breakthrough came only in 1983, with the poet’s centenary. Since then, research on his oeuvre including critical and scholarly publishing has begun. However, the poet’s position in the canon has changed only gradually, and the rigid categories are still alive today.

The presentation of this process is even more striking if we look at it in view of the relationship between Babits and Ágnes Nemes Nagy. In 1946, the younger poet Nemes Nagy and her contemporaries founded the review *Újhold*, which sought to follow the ideals and quality demands of *Nyugat*. In 1948, the journal was banned, and Nemes Nagy also became blacklisted. During these difficult years as well as during the 1956 revolution, the memorable figure of the poet and editor Babits was often the only moral and spiritual refuge for the younger poet.

■ Krystyna Zabawa

(Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków)

Beata Obertyńska's Path into the Polish Literary Canon after 1989

Beata Obertyńska (1898–1980) was a Polish poet who started to publish her poetry in the 1920s and become one of the important writers of the interwar period. Her later books should have secured her place in the Polish literary canon. Unfortunately, she was born in present-day Western Ukraine, lived in Lwów and in 1940 was arrested there by the Soviets. She was imprisoned and after a long time moved to Vorkuta concentration camp. After being released, she joined the Polish army and finally reached London through Iran, Palestine, Egypt, and Italy, where she stayed until her death. Because of this background, she could not publish and be read in the Polish People's Republic.

After 1989, she has become more and more popular, entering the literary canon which is aiming to include literature of exile. In my research, I discuss the ways of such inclusion, mention her books that have aspired to the canon, and raise the question whether this is a real opportunity for Obertyńska to be perceived as a canonical writer. The case is even more interesting because of the fact that Beata Obertyńska was the daughter of Maryla Wolska—an eminent poet of the “Young Poland” period—who was still present at least in literary criticism in communist Poland. In my opinion, it is also a representative case of the re-evaluation of the contemporary literary canon taking into consideration the representation of women in it.

More information: www.kanonas.lt

On the front page: Bust of the Soviet Lithuanian writer Antanas Venclova in a stone waste dump.
Photo by Kostas Kajėnas, 2022.