

NATIONAL CHARACTER AND MOOD OF LITHUANIAN BALLADS

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Abstract: The Lithuanian “baladės” should be held to be narrative lyrics. Because of a strong lyrical trend in Lithuanian folk poetry, very often they seem to be cases between folksongs and folk-ballads.

An attempt to explain the untragic nature of part of Lithuanian ballad-sujets is done in the article. The cause could be not only the lyrical mood of folk singers or the lack of epic as well as dramatic traditions in Lithuanian singing folklore, but on the great part the answer may be found in the medium those foreign sujets got in. In the oldest strata of Lithuanian ballads the role of mythology is of great importance, the archaic conception of death and love.

It is the avoidance of rude cruelty in Lithuanian ballads that causes the absence of certain parts; the structure of sujet becomes obscure, and the inner logic of sujet is ruled out. Dramatical manner of performance is present only sometimes, but not always in Lithuanian ballads.

The expression of the individual; traditional occasions to perform ballads; some poetical artifices of Lithuanian ballads; suppositional meaning of some ballads motifs; the classification of Lithuanian ballads as well as their origin is also reviewed shortly in the article.

Keywords: Lithuanian, lyrical, motifs, Lent and Easter, origin, sujet, meaning

Lithuanian folk-ballads material has been investigated mainly by Prof. Jonas BALYS in USA. He worked through about 12000 printed and unprinted variants and compiled it into the catalogue of Lithuanian narrative folksongs.¹ Balys' purpose was to find out which types of narrative folksongs are familiar among Lithuanians, how many variants are known and whether they have been published or reserved in archives. Another purpose of the scholar was to place the types dealing with the same region of human life as close together as possible. He divided, therefore, the songs into several chapters which are the following:

- A. Youth and Maiden (or love affairs) – 121 types and subtypes, or 35,5%. It is the leading theme.
- B. Family – 35 types, or 10%.
- C. Cruelty – 22 types, or 6%. Sujets about cruelty are not numerous, nearly all borrowed from abroad.
- D. War – 42 types, or 15%.

¹ Lithuanian Narrative Folksongs: A Description of Types and a Bibliography. – A Treasury of Lithuanian Folklore IV, Washington, Draugas Press, 1954.

E. Historical – 13 types, or 3,5%. The historical songs are undeveloped and deal mostly with wars.

F. Magic – 17 types, or 5% narrative songs, mainly about transformations.

G. Dead – 17 types, or 5%, mainly of conversations with a dead beloved person, partly of magic character.

H. Mythological – 7 types, or 2%.

I. Fate – 15 types, or 4%.

J. Drowning – 23 types, or 6%.

K. Hunting – 7 types, or 2%.

L. Animals, Birds and Plants – 21 types, or 6%.

The originality of Lithuanian folk-ballads material is more clearly seen when compared with that of other nations.² According to Prof. Jonas BALYS, the most popular five ballad-types were borrowed from abroad and considerably reshaped. All of them are of a rather sentimental character. There is no cruelty, no overweening pride, and family life is the point around which everything of importance is centered. It is probably with good reason that the mood of Lithuanian folk-songs has been characterised by our folklorist Balys SRUOGA (1927) as “naturalistic romanticism”.

In many cases Lithuanian ballads seem to be a case between folk-songs and folk-ballad. It is either because of unsuitable lyrical mood or loaned from folk-song types (especially wedding songs) motives which may be like the wholeness of ballad-sujet.

Prof. J. BALYS, after careful considerations, came to the conclusion that 106 types, or 31% of Lithuanian narrative songs have been borrowed from abroad. The rest, consisting of 234 types and subtypes, or 69%, remained as songs of “undetermined origin”. He guessed only that the final result should be somewhat like this: about half of all narrative songs are of genuine origin, and about half are loan-songs from other nations.

The Lithuanians took over the ballads mostly from their Eastern and Southern neighbours, the Slavic peoples. The Teutonic or Germanic influence is very small and can be traced in a few cases only. The Slavic influences, however, have been much more evident. On the other hand, a loaning process must have operated in both ways, vice versa: since the Lithuanian state once included large areas with East Slavic population. Several Slavic principalities were included in the Lithuanian Empire not only temporarily for a few decades, but for several centuries; and the Lithuanians formed the ruling class there. (For instance, the principality of Minsk became part of the Lithuanian state in 1326 and was lost to Moscow in 1793, the one of Vitebsk was won in 1320, lost in 1772, Polozk won around 1307, lost in 1772, Mstislavl won in 1355, lost in 1772, Kiev reduced to vassalage in 1333, completely seized in 1362, lost to Poland in 1569; Chernigov was ruled from 1355 till 1503;

² A modest attempt to search parallels of Lithuanian-Hungarian ballad-sujets and motives was the author's Master's Thesis in Vilnius University, in 2001.

Rzhev, Briansk, and Novgorod-Severski and some others were under Lithuanian rule from 1355 to 1503. Moscow was besieged and captured by Lithuanian troops four times: in 1368, 1370, 1372 and 1610–1612.) There is not much point in assuming that the Lithuanians merely took tribute from the Slavs in gold, furs, songs and tales, in material and spiritual aspects, but the Slavs did not borrow anything from the Lithuanians. The exchange must have been mutual, although the extent, period and ratio of the exchange might have been different in any individual case and aspect.

The circumstances surrounding the creation and the performance of a narrative song probably were quite different and individual in any case.³ It is typical, however, that the best narrative songs which have all the characteristic traits attributed to a “ballad”, are called “songs of Lent” among the Dzūkai in Southern Lithuania. The melodies of such “Lent songs” are serious, mournful and monotonous, often sounding very primitive (sometimes like a recitative), but they have nothing in common with the religious hymns. They probably got the name “Lent songs” because of the serious and sad events related in them: war, unexpected accidents, and tragic deaths. By labelling them as “Lent songs” Dzūkai people, who are very fond of singing, wanted to make a clear distinction from the joyous and purely lyrical songs. In Lent, two generations ago, all joyous songs, dances and games were forbidden by the Church and tradition. The people, however, could not miss singing and amused themselves with such dusky and mournful songs. Other great occasions among Dzūkai to perform narrative songs are wedding and Easter. As to the latter, there were certain narrative folk-songs, used to be sung only at Easter by a group of young men to a girl, meanwhile expecting to get some Easter eggs as presents from her. For example, a very popular ballad-sujet *Lad's drowning because of Girl's Wreath* is connected with this “lalavimas” tradition.

The wreath from the girl's head was blown into the river by the North wind. Three men came to water their horses. “Who will bring back my wreath, he will be my husband!” The youngest lad tried to get the wreath but he sank. Upon sinking he asked: “Do not tell my father that I sank for the girl's wreath; tell my father that it happened while watering the horses”.

In contrast to the tragical sujet, people did not really seem to perceive the tragical character of the story; since the melodies of most of its variants are quite joyous (and then there is Easter as an occasion to perform it). How can we explain the great popularity of the song? Folk singers as well as their auditory do not really seem to be deeply interested in the concrete event of one's drowning. It looks there might be universal symbols hidden in it, which let them express very specific individual feelings. In the Lithuanian singing folk-poetry so-called watery scenes, watery topogra-

³ Never was it mentioned that a narrative song was sung at a dance. Some melody of narrative songs, however, sound like a dance tune. And there is one case where the game song had a good deal of narrative plot (*Kotūris, Kotūrys*).

phy are very popular: drowning, passage, crossing the river or lake etc. According to text-folklorists' concordant view, great water (like: lake, river, sea, the Danube – which often can be found in Lithuanian singing folk-poetry – identified as not only a river, but also as a lake!) in some cases may have signified great love. Ancient folk singers may have been more convinced about this associative relation.

As to the individual, it is also worth mentioning that personal names are very rare in Lithuanian singing folklore (so there is no possibility for folksingers to quote a song otherwise than to recite its initial lines). In Lithuanian folktexts nameless youth, girl, family members, warriors, orphans appear. From this point of view, Lithuanian narrative folksongs may seem impersonal, but often they become personal in the way that singular first person tells the story. Even, when one sings of his own death. For instance, such is a very popular sujet of *The three mourning women as cuckoos*.

I rode over a bridge, and fell from my steed. I lay for three weeks in the mud, and only my steed was with me, only the Sun and the Moon saw me there. One night there came from the woods three cuckoos, which were really three women. One cuckoo took its place at my feet, another at my side, and the third at my head. The cuckoos cried bitterly. The first was my bride, the second my sister, and the third my mother. I divided my property: manor for father, steed for brother, clothes for sister, and the lovely words for my mother. The bride accompanied the dead to the gate only, the sister half way, and the mother the whole way to the high hill. The mother wept for her son the rest of her life, the sister wept three years, and the girl wept merely from morning to noon, and after noon she sang and danced again, and looked for another lad.

It would be presentable to quote here one of the nicest Lithuanian folk narratives, which is identified also as a work-song by some scholars. It is quite typical, in the sense that nothing tragical or dramatic action takes place in it – it is a conversation by a maiden and a lad.

At a cold spring, with clear water a young boy watered his brown steeds. A young girl came, like a white lily, and asked him: "Are the steeds yours?" "Mine, of course." "You must be careful and not fall into the cold spring." "No matter if I should fall there. My marten cap and golden rings will remain."

At a cold spring, with clear water a young girl washed her fine linen. Came a young boy, like a white clover, and asked her: "Are the linen yours?" "Mine, of course." "You must be careful and not fall into the cold spring." "No matter if I should fall there. My silken scarfs and golden rings will remain."

As it has been already mentioned, the lyrical mood of Lithuanian folk singers does not like cruel ballads, which generally have not enjoyed great popularity (few variants recorded). They are often reshaped, too. It is the avoidance of rude cruelty in Lithuanian ballads that causes the absence of certain parts; the structure of sujet becomes obscure, and finally the inner logic of sujet is ruled out. (It seems, this did not bother folksingers!) Instead of logic in the sense of its contemporary meaning, Lithuanian singing folklore preferred a kind of balance between cruelty and consolation, given by song. Such balancing elements may be, for instance, a lament in the end of the ballad, stylistic means such as the abundance of diminutives and pleasing words, certain narrative details, omissions; and sometimes the unexpected change of sujet, turning to happy ending. Dramatical manner of performance only sometimes, but not always is present in Lithuanian ballads. It is not rare that ballads of foreign origin with tragical content became the ones of humorous character among Lithuanians. Neither the melody, nor the rhythm, or the manner of performance suggest the shocking character of the story. Such narrative songs relate a tragic event only in a formal way, but they are considered as "joyous ballads" by the singing community.

So, the end of a number of Lithuanian ballad-sujet seem to be fairly untragic and unpainful. Drowning because of girl's wreath not in all cases means real death. In Lithuanian folk-songs it sometimes means ritual change of status, i.e. marriage. The drowning lad asks the girl to bury him in her rue-garden – this probably does not signal death, but the union with the girl. But in many variants the meaning of this motif is found to be changed already to that of death. In Lithuanian folklore there can be sporadically found such a change of sujet that when fished out a lad (or girl) turns to life. Also among Lithuanian ballads of drowning there are many in connection with magic transformations and beliefs.

A girl wants to go after her lover and to see his manor house, and he says that it is in the bottom of sea (or lake). The girl goes to search it and drowns. She becomes a fish, but she is caught by fishers and turns back into girl. The mother of the fishers sees she is a very extraordinary girl, and the youngest son marries her.

Another example could serve to illustrate the reserved character of folk-ballad. It is about a sister visiting her dead brother and then mourning without even mentioning he is dead.

A sister went for water and slipped from a small bridge into the river (sea) and found on the bottom her brother, tending God's horses and winding silken (golden) shackles. The sister invited him to go home. The brother ordered her to go home first and gave her a silken kerchief asking her to wash it with tears, to dry with sighs, and to press with her elbows. The sister did as ordered, but the brother did not come home.

Death events, paradoxically, are not always tragically depicted, but a married girl's longing after her father's home is tragical. It is impossible to come back, the young bride is nearly held to be dead by her brothers and sisters. Return to folks without being recognized is related in the most popular Lithuanian sujet spread both as ballad type (*Visiting Relatives in Shape of a Bird*) and as a wedding song type.

A maiden got married far away in a foreign country. She was longing after her parents and family. The third year she transformed into a duck (fish), and swam over the sea, then she flew as a cuckoo over the woods and finally reached her parents' garden. The older brothers did not recognize her, and wanted to shoot the cuckoo, but the youngest brother stopped them: "It is probably our sister". The mother came out and said: "If you are my daughter, come into the room, if you are the woods' bird, fly back to the woods".

Another well-known case of ballad's transformation to a wedding song is the widely spread type of *Bride Stolen*.

Early in the morning the mother found the door of the store house open, and the daughter was stolen. She awakened her sons and sent them to run after the thieves. They found the tracks, rode a long way, and finally discovered their sister in a big manor. "Sister, we will redeem you". It is too late, brothers. You should have come yesterday evening, when I was a young girl, for today I am already the Tartar's bride."

Some scholars share the view that the ballad goes back to former eras when the brides were occasionally robbed by foreign adventurers, by Cossacs, Tartars and so on. Also if it had been so, after some time, the tradition bound this ballad to wedding songs, the one which expresses that any kind of a marriage is the same as the abduction of a girl from her home.

In Lithuanian ballads much attention is paid to hunting and to the world of animals and plants. It is worth mentioning here, the parallelism which is quite well developed in Lithuanian singing folklore. It served as a background for many other poetical devices: metaphor, hyperbole, and symbolism, and in some cases it became the basis of song composition. An instance for this operation is the case when the narrative folk-song presents, parallel in its structure, the confrontation of the different activities of two different persons: maiden and lad, the mother and the mother-in-law, the father and the father-in-law, or a person's comparison of his former situation with his present one. But in most cases, something from the inanimate nature, from the world of plants and animals is compared with human beings, in respect to their mood and situation. The highest development of parallelism occurs, when the first part of the song is confronted with the second part of the same song. The existing folk-songs made up of even 30-40 stanzas, but in some cases, after a

time, only one section survived. Such are the hunting songs. According to some scholars, in an archaic way of thinking hunting meant lad's search after a girl, after his companion for a lifetime.

An important conclusion may be drawn about the untragic nature of part of Lithuanian ballad-sujets. The cause could be not only the lyrical mood of folk-singers or the lack of epic as well as dramatic traditions in Lithuanian folklore, but on the great part the answer may be found in the medium those foreign sujets got in. One important dimension must be marked while investigating Lithuanian ballads: in the oldest strata of ballads the role of mythology is of great importance, the archaic conception of death and love.

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