

The Lithuanianisation of Adam Mickiewicz

VIKTORIJA ŠEINA

seina.vasiliauskiene@gmail.com

Abstract. In this article, I analyse the cultural practices applied by Lithuanian interwar intellectuals seeking to Lithuanianise the great Polish romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz. Mickiewicz was born to a family of Polish-speaking nobles in a predominantly Belarusian part of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Because his historically themed works had an impact on the Lithuanian national movement, Lithuanian intellectuals sought ways to attribute Mickiewicz to Lithuanian culture.

Mickiewicz, who wrote in Polish, was a stalwart Polish-Lithuanian patriot. As this was in conflict with ethnocultural Lithuanian nationalism, interwar defenders of Mickiewicz's attribution to Lithuanian literature looked for additional arguments supporting the poet's Lithuanianess. In this article, I explore two ways that Mickiewicz was Lithuanianised: through a myth surrounding his ethnic origins and by introducing distortions into Lithuanian translations of the poet's works.

From the end of the nineteenth century, Lithuanians generally saw their local nobility as 'Polonised Lithuanians'. This view applied to Mickiewicz as well. Without having any factual evidence to support it, the interwar Lithuanian philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis sought to convince readers that Mickiewicz was descended from the Rimvydas clan. Another means of Lithuanianising Mickiewicz was through ideologically motivated editing and distorting translations of his works into Lithuanian. The most striking example of this was a 1927 anthology of the poet's works compiled by Lithuanian literary historian Mykolas Biržiška.

Keywords: Adam Mickiewicz; nationalism studies; literary canon studies; Lithuanian national movement

Introduction: The 'Mickiewicz question' in modern Lithuania

Adam Mickiewicz (1795–1855) was born in the Navahrudak (Pol. Nowogródek, Lith. Naugardukas) region (in the territory of today's Belarus), just three years after the collapse of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. At the end of the eighteenth century, the three neighbouring empires – Russia,

Prussia, and Austria – divided the federal monarchy that had been made up of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The greater part of the latter, including Navahrudak, fell under Russian control. Although Mickiewicz was already born in the Russian Empire, he considered Lithuania his homeland ([Mickiewicz] 1834: [7]). In his writing, Mickiewicz expresses love for his native land: Lithuania's past, the everyday life of the local nobility and folk traditions were the inspiration behind much of his subject matter.

Mickiewicz's writing simultaneously laid the foundation for two nineteenth century national movements – the Polish and the Lithuanian. He invited his compatriots to fight for freedom and announced the imminent resurrection of Poland–Lithuania. This made Poles worship Mickiewicz as their national prophet (*wieszcz narodowy*) (Lanoux 2001).

Lithuanians glorified Mickiewicz manily for the heroisation of medieval Lithuania. His historical poems encouraged Lithuanians to be proud of their country's impressive past, and contributed to Lithuanian national self-awareness. Jonas Basanavičius (1851–1927), the leader of the Lithuanian national movement, later wrote in his memoirs that Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828) was one of the works that most inspired his own national awareness ([Basanavičius] 1936: 20).

During Mickiewicz's lifetime, most Lithuanian noblemen did not speak the (Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian) vernacular, but rather spoke Polish. They combined regional identity with Polish patriotism, i.e., loyalty to their federal state, which they generally simply called Poland. Thus, Mickiewicz simultaneously considered Lithuania his homeland and was a loyal Polish patriot.

Meanwhile, the modern Lithuanian nationalism that emerged in the late nineteenth century was based on the Lithuanian language, ethnic folk culture, and the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (up until union with Poland). Unlike Mickiewicz, the leaders of the Lithuanian national movement did not want to restore a common state with Poland. From the beginning of the twentieth century, they made plans to create an independent national state in that part of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania that was dominated by ethnic Lithuanians. From the perspective of ethnocultural nationalism, Mickiewicz – a Polish-writing patriot of a federal state – was foreign to the modern Lithuanians.

Any community going through the transition from pre-modern to modern national forms experiences variations of the earlier identity's continuation, transformation, and adaptation. After the formation of the Lithuanian and Polish nationalisms, most of the Lithuanian nobles chose the latter as it claimed to preserve the traditions of Poland–Lithuania. However, some members of

the intelligentsia that emerged from the lesser nobility became involved in the Lithuanian national movement. Shaped by two cultures, these individuals saw the concept of an ethnolinguistic national culture based solely on ethnic Lithuanian folk traditions to be too narrow.

Seeking to expand the concept of their national culture, these intellectuals tried to integrate the Lithuanian nobility's heritage into the Lithuanian national literary canon. The Lithuanian literary historian Mykolas Biržiška (1882–1962) made the greatest efforts to this end. Born to a Polish-speaking noble family, Biržiška only learned the Lithuanian language as a university student, during which period he joined the Lithuanian national movement. In the early twentieth century, when Biržiška began his academic and pedagogical work, he opposed the ethnocentric paradigm of literary historiography. In his view, the ethnolinguistic national literature model did not suit Lithuania, as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had been a multi-ethnic state.

Biržiška argued that society, not language, was the foundation of Lithuanian literature. Because Lithuania's society spoke and wrote in different languages, its literary history ought to account for this multilingual written heritage. In around 1910 Biržiška formulated the concept of a *multilingual* Lithuanian literature to include fifteenth to nineteenth century Ruthenian, Latin, and Polish texts, including the works of Mickiewicz (Šeina 2018).

Biržiška's proposal gained several supporters and for some time it competed with the ethnolinguistic concept of Lithuanian literature, and led to Mickiewicz's works being included in the Lithuanian school curriculum. However, after Poland occupied and annexed historical Lithuania's capital Vilnius (Pol. Wilno) in 1922, anti-Polish sentiment within Lithuanian society dramatically increased. During the entire twenty years leading up to the Second World War, polonophobia continued to intensify. This seriously hampered Biržiška's and his like-minded colleagues' efforts to convince Lithuanian readers that Mickiewicz was a Lithuanian, as well as Polish, writer. Therefore, the proponents of Mickiewicz's inclusion in Lithuanian literature started to look for new, additional arguments. In this article, I examine two strategies used to Lithuanianise Mickiewicz: the myth of poet's ethnic origins and distortions of his original texts in translations.

Analysing Lithuanian intellectuals' efforts to integrate Mickiewicz into the Lithuanian literary canon, I am examining the specific cultural practices they applied to create their desired interpretation of the poet's biography and oeuvre. As mentioned above, the greatest barrier to seeing Mickiewicz as part of Lithuanian culture was his Polishness: the language in which the works were written, an identity based on citizenship rather than ethnicity, and the poet's interest in restoring the Polish–Lithuanian state.

In addition to its other functions, a national canon shapes a collective system of values and a community's model of self-identification (Herrmann 2007: 28–32). Mickiewicz clearly did not fit into the ideology of modern Lithuanianism, and this made integrating him into the Lithuanian literary canon much more challenging. Nevertheless, as John Guillory asserts, the institutions that shape canon draw on specific homogenising methods (ways of selecting and presenting texts, references to biography and the interpretation of an oeuvre) which make it possible to assimilate the otherwise threatening heterodoxies of certain texts (Guillory 1993: 63). Mickiewicz was just such a heterodoxy – one that Lithuanian intellectuals tried to adapt to modern Lithuanian nationalism.

Although Lithuanian and Polish literary scholars have analysed various aspects of Mickiewicz's reception, the question of the poet's (non)attribution to Lithuanian literature in most cases is discussed in terms of pro or con. To date, specific and especially the controversial approaches to the incorporation of Mickiewicz into the Lithuanian literary canon haven't been studied in depth. Because twenty-first-century Lithuanian literary historiography has returned to the concept of a multilingual national literature, it is important to examine techniques used in the past to integrate non-Lithuanian texts into the national culture. At least so that mistakes made in the past are not repeated.

The question of ethnic origins

The first to mention Mickiewicz's ethnic Lithuanian background was the leader of the Lithuanian national movement, Basanavičius. He made this unsubstantiated claim in 1883 in response to criticism from the Polish press. At the time, most Poles saw the Lithuanian national movement as separatism and did not support it. The Polish press reproached the Lithuanian nationalists for having turned away from Poland, which in the fourteenth century had brought the 'savage' Lithuanians Christianity and Western civilisation.

Basanavičius countered that it is Poland that should be grateful to Lithuania for raising the most talented and universally known Polish poets: "Adomas Mickevičius [...] and many lesser bards have Lithuanian, not Polish last names; they are Lithuanians, they hail from Lithuania, and Lithuanian blood flows in their veins." ([Basanavičius] 1883: 188–189). Despite the fact that Mickiewicz's name has been transliterated in the Lithuanian press it is definitely not Lithuanian, nor is there any proof that the poet's ethnic heritage is Lithuanian. Despite this, no one in the Lithuanian press opposed the views of the national movement's leader.

From the end of the nineteenth century tendencies can be seen in the Lithuanian press toward referring to local nobility as ‘Polonised Lithuanians’ who, even if they wrote in Polish, were Lithuanian in spirit (Mastianica-Stankevič 2020: 101). This attitude survived through the interwar period. One proponents of this argument was the Lithuanian philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis. Like Biržiška, Šalkauskis was of noble birth, from childhood spoke Polish at home, and only learned Lithuanian as a high school student (Šalkauskienė 1997: 72–73). Šalkauskis’ historical study *Sur les confins de deux mondes* (*At the Threshold of Two Worlds*, 1919), written while he was a student at the University of Fribourg, had a significant effect on the Lithuanianisation of Mickiewicz.

In the book, Šalkauskis argues that Mickiewicz is ethnically Lithuanian. He likely got this idea from Mickiewicz’s biographer, Piotr Chmielowski (Aleksandravičius 1999: 732). In fact, Chmielowski never claimed that Mickiewicz was an ethnic Lithuanian. He only said that the poet’s last name was a common one in the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and that there were versions of that last name with additional components Dowołgo or Rymvid (Chmielowski 1901: [13]). Šalkauskis used the fact that the latter is a name of Lithuanian origin to claim that Mickiewicz was an ethnic Lithuanian. Moreover, in his Lithuanian publications Šalkauskis identified the poet with the hyphenated name Rimvydas-Mickevičius (Šalkauskis 1924).

Šalkauskis not only promoted the legend of Mickiewicz’s Lithuanian origins but also made this the point of reference in his own interpretation of the poet’s life and oeuvre. He hoped that this – Lithuanian – version of Mickiewicz would become an alternative to the Polish cult of the poet-prophet. Only by separating the poet’s reception from the meanings that have been ascribed to him in Polish culture would it be possible to integrate Mickiewicz into Lithuanian culture. Šalkauskis sought to convince his readers that Lithuanian blood ran through Mickiewicz’s veins, that he clearly did not look characteristically Polish, and that only Lithuanians could understand his particularly close relationship to nature:

Racial purity, an innate love of nature, personal genius that is closely connected to folk genius – all of this is very characteristic of Mickiewicz and acquires ever-increasing importance as he explores his nation’s life and history. In his appearance and manner, he was somehow very Lithuanian; his acquaintances said this distinguished him within the Polish society in which he circulated. (Šalkauskis 1919: 155)

As evident from the above quote, the young Lithuanian philosopher had adopted the ideas and concepts of race theory that were broadly applied in the anthropology and ethnology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. During that period, the term national race was used to describe different national groups in terms of origin, typologising them according to specific external traits (skin and hair colour, skull shape), character traits and abilities. Šalkauskis saw Lithuanians and Poles as belonging to different races between which:

...despite all past efforts at assimilation, there cannot be any [...] common connection: neither psychological nor physiological. With some rare exceptions, there has only ever been an abstract commonality between Poles and Lithuanians; historical events may have caused the latter to become closer to Poland, but race always determined they were Lithuanians; it was thus with Mickiewicz. (Šalkauskis 1919: 156)

Šalkauskis also tried to identify a Lithuanian foundation in Mickiewicz's work. Writing about the poet's early texts, the second and fourth parts of the poetic drama *Dziady* (Forefathers' Eve, 1823), Šalkauskis claimed that "this work proclaims the Lithuanian people's belief in the world's general animism, the metempsychosis of the soul and the solidarity of souls" (Šalkauskis 1919: 166–167). Although Mickiewicz was best acquainted with Belarusian folk traditions and named his poetic drama after a Belarusian holiday, Šalkauskis claimed that Lithuanian folk traditions were the source of the poet's inspiration. The philosopher did not deny that Mickiewicz could only have become acquainted with Forefathers' Eve traditions in the predominantly Belarusian territory from which he hailed. Nevertheless, Šalkauskis was somehow certain that the origin of these traditions was Lithuanian, and that Belarusians had simply adopted and modified them. Although contemporary ethnologists hold that Forefathers' Eve customs are common to the Balts (Lithuanians) and Slavs (Belarusians) who lived beside each other for centuries, in Šalkauskis' article they are presented as proof of the poet's Lithuanianness and national spirit (Šalkauskis 1919: 167).

Šalkauskis also had an original interpretation of Mickiewicz's double – Lithuanian and Polish – identity. In the philosopher's view, Mickiewicz's Polish patriotism (his aim to recreate the Polish-Lithuanian state) was merely abstract and not truly his own, while his Lithuanian identity grew from the poet's basic physiological and spiritual nature (Šalkauskis 1919: 158).

This new direction in Mickiewicz's reception initiated by Šalkauskis soon took hold in Lithuania. For example, Biržiška had never touched on Mickiewicz's Lithuanian origins in his early publications. However, in the second edition of his work *Mūsų raštų istorija* (*A History of Our Literature*, 1925), Biržiška already presented the poet to readers as a descendent of the Lithuanian Rimvydas clan. He also suggested that the place where

Mickiewicz's ancestors lived offered another argument in support of the poet's Lithuanianness: "As early as the seventeenth century the Mickiewicz family was living in the parish of Rodūnė [Bel. Radun] in the Lyda [Bel. Lida] region, which is Lithuanian to this day. Then they moved a few dozen miles away from there to the Naugardėlis [Bel. Navahrudak] area" (Biržiška 1925: 47).

The themes of ethnic origins and ethnic Lithuanian lands became increasingly common in the poet's reception. In the school textbook of the interwar period Mickiewicz was also presented as an ethnic Lithuanian whose family originated in an ethnically Lithuanian region (Kuzmickis 1932: 179). The question of ethnic Lithuanian lands in the poet's reception is related to the geopolitical conflict between Poland and Lithuania mentioned earlier. Following the First World War, Poland took over Navahrudak and the entire Western region of today's Belarus. Lithuania also claimed a right to this territory, arguing that these were ethnically Lithuanian lands and that their inhabitants were Belarusianised or Polonised Lithuanians.

The question of Mickiewicz's (in)ability to speak Lithuanian is also related to the theme of ethnic origins. The most active discussions on this topic began when two scholars from Stefan Batory University in Vilnius, Michał Eustachy Brensztejn (1874–1938) and Jan Szczepan Otrębski (1889–1971), published a study of a Mickiewicz manuscript in which the poet had recorded the texts of two Lithuanian folk songs (Brensztejn, Otrębski 1927). Biržiška promptly reprinted the manuscript in the second edition of his school anthology of Mickiewicz's works (*Iš Adomo Mickevičiaus raštų (From the Works of Adam Mickiewicz)*, 1927). It is interesting that in this publication Biržiška did not refer to the conclusion the two Polish scholars had reached: that, considering the numerous errors in the manuscript, the poet must have heard some Lithuanian spoken in his environment, but he *neither spoke nor wrote* the language.

Comments about the above-mentioned study of this Mickiewicz manuscript also appeared in the Lithuanian press. For example, the priest Petras Kraujalis contested the Polish researchers' conclusions. He argued that Mickiewicz *knew Lithuanian well* and had learnt it not in Kaunas (as the Polish researchers claimed, based on the fact that the poet had spent several years teaching in that city), but in the Navahrudak region where he was born (Kraujalis 1927: 16–17). An active opponent of the Polonisation of the Vilnius region, Father Kraujalis based this on the commonly held view in interwar Lithuania that Navahrudak was located in an originally ethnically Lithuanian area. Following this assumption, he concluded that during Mickiewicz's childhood Lithuanian had to have been spoken in those lands. In this way, the question of whether the poet could have spoken Lithuanian became intertwined with the political goals of proving that Poland had unjustly taken over ethnically Lithuanian territory.

The de-Polonisation of translations

As mentioned above, during the interwar period Biržiška initiated the integration of Mickiewicz's works into the Lithuanian school curriculum. To this end, he compiled an anthology of the poet's works for high school students, in which he included all translations of Mickiewicz's works published to that point. The first edition of the anthology appeared in 1919, the second in 1927. The first edition was bilingual, i.e., original Polish and Lithuanian translations of works were presented side by side. At the time, Biržiška was living in predominantly Polish and Jewish Vilnius and teaching at a local Lithuanian gymnasium. The school's students were from the Vilnius area and (at least some of them) spoke Polish. During this period, Biržiška hoped that Polish would be taught in all Lithuanian high schools. He expressed this position in 1920 in a teachers' magazine, arguing that Lithuanian students should be able to read the Mickiewicz's works in their original language (Biržiška 1920).

However, within the context of Lithuania's geopolitical conflict with Poland, there could be no discussion of teaching Polish in Lithuanian high schools. Even when Mickiewicz's works were included in the school literature program, some Lithuanian teachers considered them dangerous and avoided them during their lessons. When the Polish administration expelled Biržiška from Vilnius in 1922 for anti-Polish activities, he settled in predominantly Lithuanian Kaunas. By that time, Biržiška gradually understood that in view of the continuing conflict with Poland it was unlikely that Lithuanian aversion to Polish language and culture could be overcome. This became obvious when the Lithuanian Nationalist Union came to power through a military coup in 1926. Probably realising that his concept of a multilingual national literature had no chance of competing with the dominant ethnolinguistic position, by the mid-1920s Biržiška began applying new strategies for integrating Mickiewicz into Lithuanian literature. I have already mentioned that he began to focus on the poet's ethnic Lithuanian heritage. Another tactic that Biržiška used during this period is evident in his second edition of the poet's work (this one was unilingual), where ideologically motivated elisions and distortions were made.

All of Biržiška's distortions of original Mickiewicz texts were presented in detail in previously mentioned scholar Michał Brensztejn's 1930 article in the journal *Przegląd Współczesny* (*Contemporary Review*). Discussing Biržiška's second edition of collected Mickiewicz works, Brensztejn accused the Lithuanian scholar of a lack of professional neutrality, because he intentionally omitted any expressions of Polish patriotism and adjusted any mention of Poland or Polishness (Brensztejn 1930: 275). For example, in the third part of *Dziady*, Biržiška translates the word "Polak" (Pole) as "mūsiškis" (one of ours), while Vincas Kudirkas's (1858–1899) translation uses the word "lenkas"

(Pole); if in Kudirkas's translation "Polska" (Poland) is presented as "Lenkija" (Poland), in Biržiška's anthology the word is mistranslated as "tėvynė" (homeland); in Kudirkas's translation "Vivat Polonus" (Long live the Pole) is translated correctly, but in Biržiška's anthology it appears as "valio kareivis" (hail to the soldier); if in Kudirkas's text "Polski bohaterów" (Polish heroes) is translated correctly, Biržiška uses "kovos didvyrių" (heroes of the battle), etc. Even the traditional Polish folk dance the mazurka mentioned in *Pan Tadeusz* (*Lord Thaddeus*, 1834) is distorted in Biržiška's anthology as "gaidos" ([here] music), even if a previous translation by Antanas Valaitis used the correct word "mozūras" (mazurka).

Brensztejn called Biržiška's changes to Mickiewicz's texts an act of political censorship through which the anthology's editor constructed a new, Lithuanian Mickiewicz (Brensztejn 1930: 276). On contrast to its reception in Poland, Biržiška's distortions to the poet's works did not elicit a reaction in Lithuania. In 1920s Lithuania adaptations of foreign literary texts (including shortening of original texts, rewriting, and loose translation) were common practice, which translators themselves defended as necessary strategies to adjust texts to Lithuanian society's cultural needs and poor level of education (Malažinskaitė 2015). This may explain why even some of the Mickiewicz translators whose texts Biržiška 'adjusted' did not comment on his politicised edition of the poet's work.

This 'depolonisation' (Brensztejn's term) of Mickiewicz in Biržiška's high school anthology can be interpreted as an example of the above-mentioned homogenising method of appropriating texts – a means of assimilating heterodoxies that do not comply with a canon's value system. In other words, by eliminating all references to Polishness, Biržiška subordinated the historical specificity of Mickiewicz's writing to the prevailing ideology of Lithuanianness. Mickiewicz was the only author in that period's school program whose texts (especially *Pan Tadeusz* and the third part of *Dziady*) expressed a Polish–Lithuanian identity. Not wanting to highlight this identity in high school textbooks or readings, interwar Lithuanian authors and editors consciously avoided any texts or excerpts that expressed it.

Biržiška's own attitude to the adaptation of Mickiewicz texts is clearly illustrated in his response to Brensztejn's critique in a semi-official Lithuanian newspaper:

That Lithuanian edition of Mickiewicz's writings is specially adapted to the needs of *Lithuanian* [emphasis in original] schools. And in that high school textbook it is clearly stated that certain elements have been appropriately reorganised and adapted to the schools. [...] Mickiewicz could only be presented to Lithuanian schools as a Lithuanian. The teachers themselves often do not

have the sources they would need to present Mickiewicz appropriately. (Ad. 1930: 2)

Here Biržiška clearly shows that he does not trust Lithuania's teachers – they would not have been able to explain 'correctly' the appearance of the word Poland in Mickiewicz's texts. He therefore supports an ideologised teaching of literature in schools wherein literary texts are adjusted according to the prevailing political winds: "One must, after all, take into account both political circumstances and our society's mood." (Ad. 1930: 2)

The political circumstances Biržiška references are the polonophobia in Lithuania and lithuaniophobia in Poland that became prevalent with the Lithuanian–Polish conflict over Vilnius. Biržiška was not the first to have distorted Mickiewicz's texts in Lithuanian translation. In 1919, the American-Lithuanian magazine *Moksleivis* (*The Student*) published a Lithuanian adaptation of Mickiewicz's *Księgi narodu polskiego ir pielgrzymstwa polskiego* (*The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation, 1832*), with the Lithuanian title 'Mūsų tautos gyvenimo kelias arba Knygos lietuvių tautos' (Our nation's path in life or the book of the Lithuanian nation). As can be seen from the title alone, Mickiewicz's text is here radically changed. In the text, all references to 'Poles' are replaced with 'Lithuanians', and 'Poland' is replaced with 'Lithuania'. Even the trio of empires that divided Poland–Lithuania at the end of the eighteenth century (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) is altered: instead of Austria, with which Lithuania had never had any military conflicts, the translator put Poland on the list of Lithuania's historical enemies.

The falsification of Mickiewicz's original completely distorted the text's original idea. But the unknown translator, who used the pseudonym J. K. Tautmyla (the last name suggesting 'loving his nation'), defended his decision because he was adapting Mickiewicz for the Lithuanian volunteer forces (*Mūsų tautos gyvenimo kelias* 42–43). At the time of its publication, they were defending Lithuania's independence from Poland, Bolshevik Russians, and the Bermontians, a pro-German military formation.

Similar efforts to 'delithuanianise' Mickiewicz were made in Poland as well. As early as 1902 a publication of *Pan Tadeusz*, compiled for young readers by Jan Wincenty Sędzimir, appeared in the Austrian-ruled part of Poland, in which the first line of the invocation, 'Litwo, Ojczyzna moja' (Lithuania, my homeland) was replaced with 'Polsko, Ojczyzna moja' (Poland, my homeland) ([Mickiewicz] 1902: [5]). The interwar Lithuanian press informed their readers about this and other examples of the 'delithuanianisation' of the poet's work. In 1936, for example, there was a case in which Warsaw Radio played the song "Wilia" (based on *Konrad Wallenrod*), in which the word "Litwinka"

(Lithuanian girl) was replaced by “dziewczynka” (girl) (Lenkai klastoja... 1936: 2).

During the interwar period, Mickiewicz’s oeuvre became an ideological battleground in which all possible means were used to achieve the desired goals. Biržiška himself often referred to his work on Mickiewicz as a battle in which he felt attacked from both sides: “On the Mickiewicz front I failed to find success on either the Polish or Lithuanian side!” (Lietuvos dievaitis 1955: 253).

Conclusion

Modern Lithuanian nationalism was of an ethnocultural nature, i.e., its ideological program was based on ethnic origin, national language, as well as folk customs and culture. The nation’s singularity and independence were also reinforced by the element of collective memory on which the national movement primarily focused – the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania up to the union with Poland. Having experienced a long period of political and cultural domination by Poland, nineteenth century Lithuanians could only form their national identity by distancing themselves from Poland and its culture.

The concept of Lithuanian literature also took shape during the national movement period and was naturally shaped by its ideology. Up to the early twentieth century, only works written in Lithuanian were considered Lithuanian literature. However, in the 1910s, the literary historian Biržiška revised this ethnolinguistic idea of the national literature. He suggested a broader, multilingual concept of Lithuanian literature, which integrated literary texts in Ruthenian, Latin, and Polish that were written in historical Lithuania. This created the conditions for attributing the works of the Polish national poet Mickiewicz to Lithuanian literature. Although the idea of a multilingual Lithuanian literature was not universally accepted during the interwar period, it took hold in the 1920s school curriculum.

Members of the Lithuanian national movement held the opinion that (regardless of what they themselves thought) Polish-speaking Lithuanian nobles were ethnic Lithuanians who had become Polonised. This dogma created the conditions for viewing Mickiewicz as Lithuanian, and his texts an expression of the Lithuanian soul. During the interwar period, one of the most influential proponents of this view was the philosopher Šalkauskis. He based his theory about Mickiewicz as the greatest genius of the Lithuanian spirit on speculations about the poet having been descended from the Lithuanian Rimvydas clan, having Lithuanian facial features, and having the Lithuanian worldview embedded in his writing.

The legend of Mickiewicz's ethnic Lithuanian origins spread readily in interwar Lithuania, appearing in literary historiography, articles in the print media, and school textbooks. However, the poet's attribution to Lithuanian literature was complicated by anti-Polish sentiment that had become entrenched in Lithuania following Poland's annexation of the Vilnius region. One can surmise that it was this rising polonophobia that led Biržiška to grasp at the ideologically motivated strategies of excising and distorting translations of the poet's work.

Following the Soviet occupation (1940) and reoccupation (1944) of Lithuania, there was no possibility of reviving the concept of a multilingual Lithuanian literature. Nevertheless attention to Mickiewicz's work did not wane, but the opposite. As paradoxical as it seems, the Lithuanian reception of Mickiewicz during the Soviet era followed the same pattern of nationalistic interpretation that was first established in the first half of the twentieth century (Satkauskytė 2001: 113–114). Since the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, Lithuanian historians and literary scholars have gradually returned to the concept of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's multilingual cultural tradition. This created the conditions for integrating Mickiewicz's works into Lithuanian culture without distorting their essence or adjusting them according to ethnolinguistic criteria. The myth of the poet's ethnic Lithuanian roots has been abandoned in academic discourse. This suggests it may yet be possible to integrate Mickiewicz into Lithuanian culture without appropriating him.

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