

The Significance of Imagination in Becoming a Nation: Poetry in the Late Nineteenth-Century Lithuanian Newspapers Aušra and Varpas

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Abstract. This article examines the role of poetry published in the late nineteenth-century Lithuanian monthly periodicals *Aušra* (The Dawn, 1883–1886) and *Varpas* (The Bell, 1889–1905)² in shaping modern Lithuanian national consciousness. Although *Aušra* has traditionally been interpreted within the paradigm of Romanticism, the article argues that its poetry cannot be considered Romantic in the full aesthetic sense. Instead, it functioned primarily as an instrumental, socially oriented discourse that employed selected Romantic motifs in the service of nation-building.

Drawing on theories of nationalism (Miroslav Hroch), narrative and cultural imagination (Martin Puchner), and productive imagination (Paul Ricoeur), the article analyses how poetic language in *Aušra* constructed an imagined homeland grounded in moral values, historical idealisation, and collective identity rather than individual subjectivity. Particular attention is given to prophetic and religious rhetoric, images of divine protection, and the figure of the committed individual, all of which together shaped practical models of ethical and social behaviour.

While *Aušra*'s poetry relied on prophetic and moral imagination oriented toward collective awakening, *Varpas* transformed imagination into a productive civic force, shaping models of responsible action and individual commitment. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's concept of productive imagination, the article argues that poetry in *Varpas* no longer projects an ideal future but actively shapes models of civic action and responsibility.

Keywords: Lithuanian national movement; Romanticism; Positivism; poetry; imagination

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² In the late nineteenth-century Lithuanian context, *Aušra* and *Varpas* were referred to as “newspapers”, as the concept of a modern journal had not yet emerged; functionally, however, they operated as monthly periodicals.

Introduction. The cultural and political context of Lithuania in the late nineteenth century

The nineteenth century is commonly regarded as the period in which modern forms of life were consolidated in European history. These developments were driven by scientific and industrial advances, as well as by the political and social transformations they brought about. When discussing Lithuania in the nineteenth century, it is essential to note that Lithuania as a political entity did not appear on contemporary maps. Following the third partition of 1795, which brought an end to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth after more than two centuries of existence, Lithuania became a province of Tsarist Russia – more precisely, the northwestern Region (*Северно-Западный край*) – and thus disappeared from the political map. Nevertheless, the political and cultural traditions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth remained strong throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in connection with the Polonisation of the nobility. As a result, a significant part of the Lithuanian nobility identified politically and culturally with Poland, despite their Lithuanian origin, as reflected in the well-known saying *gente Lituanus, natione Polonus* (Lithuanian ethnicity, Polish nation). These attitudes were further reinforced through literary expression. From the second decade of the nineteenth century onward, Romantic writers active in Vilnius – Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Ludwik Kondratowicz-Syrokomla, Adam Mickiewicz, and others – wrote in Polish but devoted considerable attention in their work to Lithuanian history, mythology and folklore, “thus teaching us to respect our past and love our present”³ (Vaižgantas 1924: 8). In this way, they turned Vilnius into one of the most important centres of Romanticism in Eastern Europe (Kubilius 1993: 25). The most prominent among them, Mickiewicz, asserted that he was a Lithuanian writing in Polish.

The persistence of these attitudes is also confirmed by the uprisings against Tsarist Russia that took place in Lithuania in 1831 and 1863–1864. These events clearly demonstrate that the idea of the state and the related conception of citizenship were still associated with Poland, since one of the primary aims of both uprisings was the restoration of the historical Polish–Lithuanian state. The uprisings were suppressed; their participants, mostly members of the nobility, were exiled, and their lands were resettled with Russians as part of a colonisation policy. In 1832, Vilnius University was closed, and in 1840 the

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Lithuanian into English, including poetry translations, are by the author and are intended as close renderings of the originals.

Statute of Lithuania was abolished, bringing an end to the legal system of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and imposing numerous restrictions on both the nobility and the peasantry.

After the uprising of 1863, Russification expanded into the spheres of culture, education and religion. In 1864, Lithuanian writing in the Latin alphabet was banned, the Lithuanian language was removed from schools, and Catholics were forbidden to purchase land, build churches and crosses, or work in state service. The primary aim of these aggressive Russification policies was to distance Lithuanians from the Polish language and culture. In practice, however, the opposite occurred: sympathy for Polish language and culture intensified, and Polish became increasingly dominant in both cultural life and public communication. By the second half of the nineteenth century, even economically better-off peasants had begun to speak Polish. This turn toward Polish culture was criticised in the discourse surrounding *Aušra* and continued to be problematised in later reflections on the period. As recalled several decades afterwards: “To pray from a Polish prayer book, to keep a Polish calendar, to read *Gazeta Świąteczna*, and to be able to converse with the feldsher or the estate steward were regarded as marks of refinement and distinction among our ‘progressive peasants’” (Šakenis 1933: 28).

Despite the efforts of the Tsarist administration, however, the project of Russifying and Orthodoxising Lithuanians ultimately failed. The anticipated Lithuanian–Russian type did not emerge, as evidenced by a confidential letter written in 1903 by the Governor General of Vilnius, Pyotr Svyatopolk-Mirsky: “Lithuanians have neither a historical nor a cultural past. Therefore, the future of this small nation belonging to Russia is decided – to melt into the mass of the Russian population. The fate of Lithuanians has been decided by history, as has the fate of Estonians, Latvians, and other nations that have not created a cultural past” (quoted in Jonaitis [Šidlauskas] 1994: 36). Undoubtedly, Russification significantly hindered the country’s economic and cultural development.

Religion appears to have played a decisive role in resistance to Russification. Lithuanians actively opposed Orthodoxisation, perceiving Orthodoxy as the religion of the occupier and as a threat to their identity. It is therefore not accidental that contemporary press repeatedly asserted: “To be Lithuanian means to be Catholic.” The close connection between Lithuanian identity and Catholicism is confirmed by the journalistic writings of figures associated with the national movement. One of the most important authors of this period, the priest and writer Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas (1869–1932), published the Catholic, liberal-oriented newspaper *Tėvynės sargas* (Guardian of the Homeland) during the years of the press ban. In his articles, he

consistently addressed the rights of the Lithuanian language, the restoration of a Lithuanian-language press, and education in the native language, linking these issues to Catholicism and thereby emphasising the interdependence of Lithuanian identity and Catholic faith. At the same time, *Tėvynės sargas* devoted considerable attention to national questions in an effort to dissociate Catholicism from its automatic association with Polishness, stressing that Catholic confession did not in itself imply Polish national identity. This resulted in a situation in which, “in the nineteenth century, due to extraordinary political circumstances, the religious element in Lithuanian literature began to intertwine with the national element” (Šešplaukis 1967: 133).

Although for much of the nineteenth century there was, in essence, “no Lithuanian nation ... but only Lithuanian-speaking people” (Rimka 1932: 27), a different dynamic emerged in the final decades of the century. Despite unfavourable economic and political conditions and the confidence of Tsarist officials that Russification would succeed – based on the assumption that Lithuanians possessed neither a written tradition nor an intelligentsia (quoted in Vėbra 1990: 43) – a small group of nationally conscious Lithuanian intellectuals from lower social strata began to form. For these figures, language increasingly came to be understood as the primary foundation of national identity. Prior to the national movement, a Lithuanian-speaking peasant could scarcely explain how he differed from a Pole who professed the same faith, since language was not regarded as a defining criterion of identity. Consequently, the “Spring of Nations” in Lithuania began only in the final two decades of the nineteenth century, although its ideas had reached Eastern Europe nearly fifty years earlier. These emerging Lithuanian intellectuals had to confront a deeply entrenched stereotype according to which culture and refinement were identified with Polishness. As a result, the national movement that took shape at the end of the nineteenth century was labelled “barbaric” and anti-cultural, while its participants were described as “Lithuaniomaniacs” (*litvomanija*) of a “very low level of thinking and political education”, as comic “national chauvinists”, and as pseudo-intellectuals influenced by foreign ideas of “suspicious origin and value” (Žaltauskaitė 2009: 333).

Nevertheless, these nationally conscious intellectuals had an important predecessor in the historian Simonas Daukantas (1793–1864), who was among the first to raise the question of language in his historical writings and to link it explicitly to national identity, formulating the idea that language constitutes the most important component of such identity. Drawing on ancient moral and political thought as well as on the ideas of the Enlightenment and Romanticism (Pivoras 2022: 13), Daukantas resolutely turned away from a culture produced in the Polish language. Unlike the Vilnius Romantics and

much of the Lithuanian nobility – who felt themselves to be Lithuanian but wrote in Polish – he articulated in his historical works, written between 1822 and 1850, a new and distinctly modern idea for his time: that a Lithuanian is one who speaks Lithuanian: “For it is permitted by God that all nations each possess a distinct language and way of life” (Daukantas 1976: 211). Daukantas was well acquainted with German philosophical and linguistic thought and was particularly influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder, whose works he read while living in Riga (Pivoras 2022: 137), especially Herder’s idea that a nation can survive only by preserving its language. For this reason, the primary significance of Daukantas’s historical writings lies not in their scholarly contribution but in their didactic function. The educational and formative approach associated with positivist philosophy proved crucial for the emergence of modern national attitudes. Daukantas’s works were widely known and read by intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century, as confirmed by Jonas Šliūpas, an active participant in the national revival movement, who wrote in the first issue of *Aušra* in 1884 that Daukantas’s role in ensuring that Lithuanian was spoken and written was exceptionally significant, since “he poured into us, drop by drop, love for language and homeland” (J. Szl. [Šliūpas] 1884: 1). *Aušra*, which began publication more than thirty years after Daukantas’s historical works, continued to develop and disseminate his ideas.

From *Aušra* to *Varpas*: Continuities and Shifts in National Imagination

In the spring of 1883, when “to read and write in Lithuanian had already become a state crime” (Kubilius 1993: 54), the monthly periodical *Aušra* began publication. It appeared for three years, and three years later – in 1889 – the periodical *Varpas* was launched. These two publications are widely regarded as the most important symbols of the Lithuanian national revival. They mark the beginning of the modern, organised Lithuanian national movement, when national consciousness first began to manifest itself systematically through the printed word. *Aušra* and *Varpas* were the first Lithuanian periodicals printed in the Latin alphabet⁴, published illegally in Lithuania Minor and secretly transported by book smugglers into Lithuania Major in order to resist Tsarist Russification.

⁴ Alongside *Aušra* and *Varpas*, the conservative Catholic monthly periodical *Žemaičių ir Lietuvos apžvalga* (Samogitian and Lithuanian Review) (1889–1896) was published at the end of the nineteenth century; it was later replaced by the more liberally oriented Catholic periodical *Tėvynės sargas* (1896–1904).

Undoubtedly, *Aušra*, as the earlier publication, was the first to articulate a programme for the formation of Lithuanian society. This programme was Romantic in orientation; although positivist attitudes gradually became visible over the course of its publication, such key lexemes as homeland, nation, native language, light, and freedom were treated in a distinctly Romantic manner. *Varpas*, which appeared three years later and was clearly positivist in orientation, adopted a critical stance toward *Aušra*'s Romanticism. Nevertheless, the two publications were united by a common subordination of aesthetics to an idea and – analogously – by the subordination of the individual to the community. For this reason, the same core lexemes remained central in *Varpas* as in *Aušra*: homeland, nation, native language, light, and freedom. Having shed their Romantic abstraction and mysticism, however, these concepts were treated more realistically and explicitly linked to harsh social realities. In the poetry published in both periodicals, verbs such as to awaken, to call, and to revive are frequently used in the imperative, functioning as calls to concrete action. The linking of poetic ideas – or the word itself – with action is characteristic of politically oriented poetry. Thus, although the publications of the press-ban period did not openly pursue political goals, their insistence on shaping national self-awareness through a prohibited language effectively fulfilled a political function.

The Czech historian Miroslav Hroch, who has extensively studied and compared national movements in Central Europe, has shown that such nations were formed on the basis of ethnic communities. What characterises these communities is the absence of an ethnic elite and cultural production in a literary language, as well as the lack of a unified ethnic territory organised into a single social and administrative unit. These nations, which Hroch terms “small nations”, differ fundamentally from nations that possessed states and were able to rely on state institutions and policies to sustain an uninterrupted tradition of statehood (Hroch 1989: 106–109). When a state is formed on an ethnic basis, imagination – in this case, national imagination – plays a particularly crucial role, as it provides an existing ethnic community with symbolic national images that enable it to begin acting as a nation. This role of written images in nation formation can also be understood within a broader cultural framework. Literary scholar Martin Puchner, in *The Written World: The Power of Stories to Shape People, History, Civilization*, likewise emphasises that written narratives have historically functioned not merely as reflections of culture but as active forces shaping people's self-understanding, political imaginaries, and collective identities. According to Puchner, the printed word possesses a capacity for “world-making” in that it does not simply describe worlds, but brings communities together and provides them with historical

direction and models of action (Puchner 2017). From this perspective, *Aušra* and *Varpas*, along with other illegal Lithuanian publications, can be understood as narrative spaces in which a still imagined modern Lithuanian nation was being actively created.

Both *Aušra* and *Varpas* regarded the task of national and cultural revival as paramount, and this task absorbed individual experience, placing the needs of the community in the foreground. *Aušra* proclaimed the necessity of awakening the nation, revitalising the Lithuanian language, history, and culture, fostering national dignity and strengthening a spiritual commitment to being Lithuanian. *Varpas* articulated similar aims; however, having abandoned the Romantic opposition between past and present as well as the vision of an idealised future, its programme was more closely tied to contemporary realities and to the personal effort of each individual:

To teach Lithuanians to think in Lithuanian, to rouse and unite them in work, to accustom them to behave as Lithuanians ought, to clarify the paths by which they might proclaim aloud: “We are Lithuanians!”, to raise the spiritual and “material” condition of Lithuania, to shake off from Lithuanians an uncomprehending attachment to foreign nations, to ignite in the hearts of brothers at least a small spark of love for the homeland – this is our goal, this is the task of *Varpas*. (-j-g- [Gaidys-Gaidamavičius] 1889: 2)

Although *Aušra*’s programme focused on national and cultural revival, its literary expression was far from uniform. Approximately one hundred poems were published in *Aušra*; consequently, among all the texts it printed, poetry may be regarded as the most important programmatic element and as the most effective form of awakening national consciousness. At the same time, poetry was also the genre in which internal contradictions and polemical tensions were most clearly articulated (Daujotytė 1990: 181–182). Furthermore, *Aušra*’s poetry cannot be evaluated as autonomous artistic poetry, since its aesthetic value was limited by imperfect language, extensive borrowings, imitation of foreign poets, literal translations, and a predominantly descriptive style. An even more decisive factor was the principled conviction that poetry was obliged to perform a social and public function. As a result, *Aušra*’s poetry lacks individual inner problematics and reflections on existential experience. The poets’ gaze was directed instead toward the honourable past of the homeland and an idealised vision of the future, whose abstract ideality was underscored by the symbolism of a happy tomorrow, awakening, resurrection and the rising sun.

Models of National Sentiment Formation in *Aušra*

The most important image in the poetry published in *Aušra* is that of the homeland. This image is multilayered and grounded in one of the defining features of the Romantic worldview – the opposition between a glorious past and a wretched present. The glorious past appears as a generalised image of a forgotten historical era revived through imagination, supplemented by the theme of language and by elements of a romanticised landscape, such as the forest, the rising sun, and the castle.

The content of this imagined homeland was shaped by Daukantas's historiography, in which the Lithuanian nation is presented as a "nation of free and equal citizens" that existed in the past (Kuolys 2019: 185). Daukantas's contribution was especially significant in that this morally grounded image of an idealised past was elevated to the status of a political ideal to be pursued in the future. Moreover, in *Istorija žemaitiška* (The History of Samogitia), the word *valstybė* (state) was used for the first time in the Lithuanian language, conveying the prophetic message that "Lithuania exists; it has its own history, it has its own language, and therefore it has its own future" (Bončkutė 2020). The lexis of this image was also influenced by the Vilnius Romantics, above all by Mickiewicz's poetry, which shaped the ideal of the homeland as a "free and equal community of people" (Daujotytė 1990: 185). The poetry of the Vilnius Romantics also taught *Aušra*'s poets poetic language, since "once transferred into its own language, the idea of Lithuania lost an adequate artistic expression" (Jonaitis [Šidlauskas] 1994: 56).

Almost all *Aušra* poets grounded their love for the homeland in the greatness of the past, whose ideality was articulated through such concepts as honour and dignity, glory and steadfastness. The greatness of the past was understood as a moral value and thus associated with the spiritual strength and firmness of the people who had lived there. It was repeatedly emphasised that this greatness must be reclaimed, since doing so was considered morally just. A characteristic example of this mode of expression is the poem "Lietuva" (Lithuania) by Miliauskas-Miglovara, published in the second issue of *Aušra* in 1883. The poem contains images common to many *Aušra* contributors: Lithuania is precious because it is a land with an ancient and honourable history, and language is understood not as a communicative tool but as a moral category, since speaking Lithuanian testifies to loyalty to the homeland. The poem is also typical in its mode of expression: it lacks a lyrical "I" and is articulated from a third-person perspective, oriented toward narration and description. Consequently, the Romantic opposition between past and present is transferred from a personal to a collective plane. At the narrative level, the poem recalls biblical prophetic rhetoric: a legitimate, blessed state is replaced

by images of catastrophe and decline, and the poem concludes with a prayer-like appeal projecting national revival as a moral and spiritual act. The present, associated with stagnation and dormancy, is depicted as the result of forces beyond human will: “cold spells and fierce storms set in” and “our hands froze, our tongue withered” (Miglovara 1883: 35).

The bright future associated with the moral category of truth is likewise beyond human choice or agency. Spiritual awakening depends on the power of the sun, which functions as a higher, almost metaphysical transformative force capable of awakening the land from its prolonged sleep:

And grant the Lithuanians to behold all of Your light
Grant us happiness once again to attain and recognise the truth. (Ibid.)

*O Lietuviams duok išvysti visą savo šviesą
Duok mums laimę vėl dastoti ir pažinti tiesą*

Imperative addresses directed first to the sun and, in the final stanzas, to the Highest confirm that the poet speaks not as an individual lyrical subject but as a mediator between a frozen, language-deprived nation and a higher, transcendent order grounded in truth. This mediating structure allows the poet to assume a prophetic position in which individual authorial identity dissolves and poetry becomes a channel of communication between transcendent truth and the collective subject. Such a rhetorical stance confirms once again that *Aušra*’s poetry functions not as autonomous artistic creation but as prophetic discourse that mobilises the nation and shapes practical models of behaviour.

Thematically close to Miglovara’s poem is Maironis’s debut poem “Lietuvos vargas” (Lithuania’s Suffering), signed with the pseudonym Zvalionis and later repeatedly revised and included in the collection *Pavasario balsai* (Voices of Spring) under the title “Miškas ūžia” (The Forest Rustles). Having abandoned a descriptive mode, the poem adopts a more intimate voice connected to the experiences of the lyrical “I”. Drawing on a characteristic repertoire of Romantic imagery (the forest, the heart, the past), Zvalionis’s lyrical subject identifies with the forest’s sorrowful, heart-piercing speech about a lost former age, thereby lending the poem an existential dimension. Significantly, Zvalionis links this lost age not to historical injustice but to human weakness (“we have strayed through weakness”), while entrusting the future – through the biblical metaphor of wings⁵ (“Hold us beneath Your wing!”) – to God’s care, forgiving love, and protection:

⁵ These are just a few examples from the Old Testament Book of Psalms: “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a

We have strayed through weakness,
 Yet we are still Your children;
 Defend us everywhere, grant us unity,
 Hold us beneath Your wing!" (Zvalionis 1885: 195)

*Mes paklydę per silpnybę,
 Bet mes vienok vaikai tavo;
 Gink mus visur, duok vienybę,
 Turėk mus po sparnu savo!*

For this reason, Zvalionis does not construct a prophetic vision of national rebirth grounded in historical or moral transformation, but instead implores divine protection as a promise of communal survival. In terms of Paul Ricoeur's concept of productive imagination, the poem models practical conduct: the community's capacity to endure, to accept social reality, and to preserve moral resilience under conditions of historical oppression.

This theme is continued in "Mūsų šalėlė" (Our Little Country) by one of the first Lithuanian women poets, Liudvika Malinauskaitė-Eglė. Here, too, the poem constructs an image of God's protection as essential to communal survival:

And though the lords torment us,
 God nonetheless saves us.
 (Aglė [Malinauskaitė-Eglė] 1883: 255)

*Ir nors ponai mus kankina
 Vienok dievas mus gelbina.*

Malinauskaitė-Eglė emphasises the Christian principle of the equality of all people before God, an aspect not developed in Zvalionis's poem. In this way, Eglė's poem acquires a greater sense of lived concreteness: social differences are acknowledged as a fact of earthly reality, even though they are insignificant on the spiritual plane: "There, the rich and the poor, / the mighty and the destitute are equal" (ibid.) (*Ten vienodas ir turtingas / Ir nabagas ir galingas*).

The poem "Broliams Lietuviams" (To Lithuanian Brothers) can be regarded as an intermediate model in the transition from Romantic prophetic rhetoric to individual commitment. Significantly, although the poem was written by a woman, Liudvika Malinauskaitė-Eglė, its address is directed exclusively

shield and buckler" (Psalm 91:4, ESV); "Be merciful to me, O God ... In the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by" (Psalm 57:1, ESV).

to “brothers”, rather than to both brothers and sisters, thus reproducing the masculine-coded mode of civic address characteristic of nineteenth-century national discourse. Employing a didactic, educational imagination, the poet models a new practical relationship to reality grounded in the power of science: “The time has come to open our eyes / and for all to recognise the light of learning” (Eglė [Malinauskaitė-Eglė] 1883: 72) (*Jau laikas didis akis pratrinti / Ir szviesą mokslo visiems pažinti*). In the poet’s imagination, this science-based relation to reality becomes a precondition for spiritual elevation, inner strength, and the recognition of lost historical experience.

Alongside prophetic rhetoric of spiritual salvation and hopeful divine protection oriented toward intervention by a higher order, the figure of the committed individual also emerges in *Aušra*’s poetry. This heroic model of behaviour, deriving in part from Daukantas’s notion of heroic solitude, is grounded in an individual subject’s decision and action. Such an image becomes particularly important in poems by *Aušra* writers of a more positivist orientation, for example, Jonas Mačys-Kėkštas’s “Dirbti!” (To Work!), which calls for labour “on the soil of the nation” by day and by night, throughout the year. This poem can be read as a prelude to Kudirka’s “Labora”, published later in *Varpas*, which likewise urges the reader to work so as “not to grow mouldy and go to the grave / without leaving a sign that you had been human.”

At the same time, *Aušra* also published a considerable number of poems of a Romantic orientation in which national revival is envisioned as the result of the resolve of the individual “I” to act. A paradigmatic example is Mečislovas Davainis-Silvestravičius’s “Brangioji Lietuva” (Dear Lithuania), in which the decision of the “I” is presented as a normative reference for collective action:

Though your neighbours wish to assign you a grave,
I will not allow the native language to die.
(Vieversys [Davainis-Silvestravičius] 1883: 78)

*Nors tau kaimynai grabą nori skirti,
Aš neduosiu kalbai prigimtai numirti.*

Such a heroic “I” position, grounded in the separation of “I” from the collective “we”, is articulated in Andrius Vištelis-Višteliauskas’s poems devoted to questions of language, as well as in Ksaveras Sakalauskas-Vanagėlis’s poems, in which the homeland’s suffering is experienced and articulated as personal.

Although all *Aušra* poets expressed love for the Lithuanian language and the nation’s glorious past, “reconstructing it in imagination as a kind of happy golden age” (Mykolaitis-Putinas 2008: 202), in reality this stance was sustained by only a small group of committed individuals who went against the current,

resisting the inertia of Polish culture as well as the growing economic and capitalist interests that most often ignored national issues. That *Aušra's* poetry was not widely read is also indicated by *Aušra's* own journalistic writings, which acknowledge that it contained "material completely unsuited to people, especially poetry, which not only ordinary people but even the intelligentsia are not particularly inclined to read".

Although *Aušra* began as a relatively unified movement, Romantic and positivist orientations gradually became more distinct and engaged polemically over the aims of literature: the Romantics devoted greater attention to the cultivation of national feeling, whereas *Varpas* emphasised reason. This division is already evident in the earliest issues of *Aušra*. Authors who identified with an educational, positivist orientation – Andziulaitis-Kalnėnas, Mačys-Kėkštas and Šliūpas – criticised Romantic poetry whose images of victorious battles contrast with the present and "ignite feelings, stir the heart", yet provide no knowledge. For this reason, "such emotional stirring today neither warms nor cools us", since "the mind, left expectant, waits for answers to its own questions and grumbles when it receives none" (Kuokštis [Šliūpas] 1883: 109).

According to Andziulaitis-Kalnėnas, the common people were incapable of understanding rhymed poems about the glorious campaigns of dukes and the perfection of the Lithuanian language; for a peasant to read such poetry was "the same as singing a song to a tree stump." The people therefore first had to be accustomed to reading through texts that provided practical knowledge – about farming, medicine, and similar matters – as well as short prose works grounded in everyday life (Kal. [Andziulaitis-Kalnėnas] 1885: 393). This kind of criticism was also taken up by *Varpas* authors, who were dissatisfied that the Romantics focused solely on cultivating national consciousness among the educated elite. They demanded education for the broader populace; consequently, literature had to become socially effective and practically useful.

From today's perspective, it is clear that the significance of *Aušra's* poetry lay not in its popularity or immediate impact, but in the historically and morally charged symbols it created, which made it possible to think about the nation, language, and community as a value-bound whole. These narrative models, despite their limited circulation, possessed – in Puchner's terms – the power to shape people's self-understanding, collective memory, and the imagination of historical agency.

Models of Civic Action Formation in *Varpas*

The images characteristic of *Aušra's* poetry and associated with a Romantic worldview – idealised landscapes, the historical past, folk songs; and the

exaltation of language, through which patriotism was awakened and national identity constructed – largely disappear from *Varpas*. Although an instrumental relationship to literature was retained, its character changed fundamentally: contributors to *Varpas* emphasised economic and social progress and therefore prioritised the educational and cognitive functions of art. The shift from *Aušra*'s idealised vision of the future to an orientation toward the concrete needs of everyday life resulted in the predominance of realistic prose in *Varpas*, while poetry appeared only sporadically.

The polemic initiated in *Aušra* concerning whether cultural activity should be grounded in Romantic or positivist principles was effectively resolved in *Varpas*. The *Varpas* circle had no doubt that the national movement required more than the glorification of historical memory; in their view, it had to be replaced by active social commitment. Consequently, the patriotic rhetoric of *Aušra* contributors was criticised in the journal as both ideologically and literarily unpromising. It was emphasised that the time of poeticising "Lietuvėlė" as a nightingale soaring in the skies had already passed. Jonas Gaidamavičius-Gaidys, one of the founders of *Varpas*, criticised the amateur poems flooding the editorial office, raising the question of whether it was still believed that one could "find Lithuania's salvation in songs". In this sense, *Varpas* embodies a positivist model of national society-building grounded in rational argument rather than emotion, in which literature relinquishes its prophetic mission and becomes an instrument of social action.

The principal poet of *Varpas* was Vincas Kudirka, while the second most prolific contributor of poetry was Jonas Mačys-Kėkštas, who had already advocated that literature have a realist orientation during the *Aušra* period. Other poets worth mentioning include Pranas Vaičaitis and Petras Arminas-Trupinėlis, alongside several contributors who published only one or two poems. Kudirka did not consider himself a poet, although he began his creative career with poetry, publishing a poem imitation entitled "Dėl ko žydai nevalgo kiaulienos" (Why Jews Do Not Eat Pork) in *Aušra*. In total, Kudirka wrote approximately fifteen poems, which have been widely discussed in Lithuanian literary scholarship. Analyses have emphasised their ideological and socially engaged character: they were most often composed for specific occasions and therefore abound in "symbols, images, and ideas drawn from national and social life" (Mykolaitis-Putinas 2008: 234). Some of the symbols employed by Kudirka (such as the grain, the soil, and the heart) are also characteristic of *Aušra*'s poetry; however, in Kudirka's work they lose their prophetic and allegorical character and are redirected toward the present and future of the nation as something created through human effort – through hard work, sustained commitment, and conscious self-sacrifice.

These images no longer signify a promise of salvation or divine intervention, but instead establish an ethic of action grounded in personal responsibility. Accordingly, Kudirka's poetry assumes the form of a civic imperative, markedly distanced from the prophetic rhetoric and the call to trust in God's protection characteristic of *Aušra's* poetry. In contrast, in the poem "Apžvalga's Learning", polemicising with the conservative Catholic newspaper *Žemaičių ir Lietuvos Apžvalga* (Samogitian and Lithuanian Review), Kudirka mocks false, theatrical religiosity and the outward display of faith. The Christian maxim of behaving "quietly according to God's way" is rendered ironic:

And those who behave quietly
According to God's way
Will reap from this
A very meagre reward. (Kudirka 1989: 79)

*O kas elgiasi tyloms
Pagal Dievo būdą,
Tasai teturi iš to
Pelną labai kūdą.*

This irony once again highlights Kudirka's stance: instead of passive endurance, he consolidates the imperative of active engagement – formulated only episodically in *Aušra's* poetry – and transforms it into a central ethical principle of his own work. This imperative voice resounds with particular clarity in Kudirka's poem of the same title, published in the very first issue of *Varpas*. The poetic image constructed in this poem marks a clear departure from *Aušra's* poetics: the recurring image of the bell functions as a leitmotif, organising the entire semantic structure of the text around an imperative of mobilisation:

When in the morning the sun with its first ray
Revealed to the earth its rising,
The bell rang out with the clearest command,
As though it had been given human lips:
Arise, arise, arise, arise ... (ibid. 44)

*Kad rytą saulė spinduliu pirmiausiu
Apreiškė žemei tekėjimą savo,
Užgaudė varpas liepimu aiškiausiu,
Tarytum jisai žmogaus lūpas gavo:
Kelkite, kelkite, kelkite, kelkite...*

The imperative mode of address – which does not prophesy but calls out, does not promise but demands – is reinforced by rhetorical exclamations and direct appeals expressed through the imperative mood.

In terms of both mode of address and thematic focus, one of Kudirka's most significant poems, "Labora!", is closely related to this text. It is no coincidence that, for a title directly corresponding to the poem's central idea, the poet selected the moral injunction "labour" from the Benedictine monastic motto *ora et labora* (pray and work) (Gaigalaitė 2001: 768). By rejecting the dimension of prayer and emphasising action, Kudirka secularises the work ethic and transforms it into a principle of civic self-formation. As noted by scholars, "the poem opens with an allegory of the farmer, easily recognisable to the Lithuanian intelligentsia of peasant origin" (ibid.). In this way, the imperative of work is grounded not in an abstract moral plane but in everyday experience and practical action. In the poem, labour is understood not only as a social obligation but also as a condition of personal self-formation:

Read the book of life page by page;
do not pause, lest idleness overtake you,
so that you do not wither away and pass into the grave
without leaving a trace that you once lived as a human being.
(Kudirka 1989: 45)

*Gyvenimo knygą skaityk laps į lapą,
Nestodams, kad kartais, į tinginius kliuvs,
Tu nesupelytum ir neitum į kapą
Be likusio ženkle, kad žmogumi buvęs.*

Human value is thus defined through action, effort, and the capacity to leave a meaningful trace within the community. Although "Labora!" is often compared to Mickiewicz's "Ode to Youth", Romantic enthusiasm in Kudirka's poem is replaced by a rational, ethically grounded imperative of labour, directed toward the conscious self-formation of both the individual and society.

Another important poem by Kudirka is "Gražu, gražiau ir gražiausia" (Beautiful, More Beautiful, and Most Beautiful), dedicated "to the memory of the gathering at J. Gaidys's place in Warsaw" commemorating the illegal society *Lietuva*, from whose activities the periodical *Varpas* later emerged. In this poem, the concept of aesthetic autonomy is deliberately rejected, since "the beautiful" is defined not as an aesthetic but as a moral category. Beauty is associated with service to the community, civic duty, and responsible action for the common good:

Yet the most beautiful thing of all is to see with one's own eyes
 When deeds correspond to hearts and words,
 When all those Lithuanians, of their own free will, unforced,
 Pave the path for the glory of their homeland. (ibid. 46)

*Gražiausia vienok esti akimis matyti,
 Kada širdims ir žodžiams ir darbui atsako,
 Kad visi tie lietuviai patys, nevaryti,
 Savo tėvynės garbei ne'pželdina tako.*

Commitment to the homeland and to the collective is so strong in Kudirka's work that it permeates even the personal, confessional sonnet "Valerijai" (To Valerija), dedicated to his friend Valerija Kraševska. Unusually for Lithuanian love poetry, the addressee is named not as a beloved but as a friend, one who, in a moment of crisis, prevents collapse and reminds the speaker of his duty to the homeland and the community: "The homeland / looks at you – rise, you are needed by her!" (ibid. 53) (*Tėvynė / Žiūri į tave, kelkis – tu jai reikalingas!*). After the "great choice", when Lithuania, in Kudirka's own words, became his "betrothed", (Vaitiekūnienė 2018) the personal bond does not generate an alternative life project but instead reinforces the resolve to act. Even within a situation of love, the subject is defined through obligation to the community, work, and fidelity to the chosen path, while the figure of the friend functions as a moral intermediary sustaining civic self-formation.

Another poet associated with *Varpas* who merits attention is Mačys-Kėkštas. He had already been active in *Aušra* and belonged to a group of intellectuals who polemicised against its Romantic-heroic orientation and argued instead for realist literature and education. His poem "Dirbti!" (To Work!), published in *Aušra*, is grounded in what Ricoeur terms a productive, practical imagination: here poetry functions as a moral impulse toward concrete everyday action.

Through this poem, which calls for the fulfilment of communal and civic duties founded on sustained labour, Mačys-Kėkštas clearly distances himself from the rhetoric of prophetic expectation or salvation:

Work with your hands,
 Work with your mind,
 Work without ceasing
 Day and night! (Mačys-Kėkštas 1948: 40)

*Darbauti su rankom,
 Darbauti išmintim,
 Darbauti neliovaujant
 Dieną ir naktim!..*

In the poems published in *Varpas*, the poet returns to the image of the prophet, yet this return is no longer Romantic in nature. Here, the prophetic figure functions as a mobilising rhetorical stance intended to intensify the civic imperative. Biblical rhetoric is thus transferred into a secular moral sphere: prophecy no longer promises salvation but articulates responsibility, and imagination no longer projects an ideal future world but shapes practical forms of conduct. This is particularly evident in Mačys-Kėkštas's poem "Bausmas" (Punishment), in which moral judgment arises not from the will of God but from the "spirit of the age," a force that cannot be resisted "by swords, chains, or iron" (ibid. 63).

During the *Varpas* period, it becomes evident that the Romantic and religious figure of the prophet characteristic of *Aušra* gradually loses its dominant position. Mačys-Kėkštas's work marks a transitional stage in this process: in poems such as "Pašaukimas" (The Calling) and "Bausmas", biblical prophetic rhetoric is still employed, yet it has already been relocated to a historical and moral plane. Prophecy here no longer promises salvation or projects an ideal future world, but instead articulates responsibility and moral judgment arising from the "spirit of the age" itself.

In Kudirka's poetry, literature definitively abandons its prophetic and protective functions and becomes an instrument of conscious civic action, marking a transition from a Romantic mode of national imagination to rational national self-awareness. In this process, the figure of the committed individual is no longer a Romantic hero or prophet, but a conscious citizen who understands action as a moral duty. Consequently, personal experience in Kudirka's work does not become autonomous lyrical content, but acquires meaning only insofar as it mobilises action and engagement in communal labour.

Thus, in Kudirka's poetry, imagination functions not as an idealised projection of the future, but as the productive, practical imagination described by Ricoeur – one that forms concrete models of action and enables the subject to imagine themselves as acting. Poetry no longer awakens expectation or belief in salvation, but structures civic self-awareness and orients the subject toward responsible action in the present.

Closing Reflections

The construction of Lithuanian society was the foremost task of the entire illegal Lithuanian press at the end of the nineteenth century, regardless of the ideological orientation it represented. This emphasis on the primacy of society and its precedence over the individual brought together both the Romantic conception of historiography – according to which the subject and measure of history is the nation or the people rather than the individual – and positivist

attitudes that regarded service to the community as more important than individual needs.

The first Lithuanian newspaper, *Aušra*, may be regarded as a miniature model of Lithuanian society at the end of the nineteenth century. Although it began as a relatively unified movement of national self-awareness, over time distinct ideological lines emerged: Romantic, Catholic, and positivist, the latter later differentiating into liberal and social-democratic currents. The attribution of *Aušra*'s poetry to the Romantic paradigm is therefore conditional, since a defining feature of European Romanticism – the primacy of the individual – is not yet developed here. Instead, collective imagination dominates, together with prophetic and religious rhetoric oriented toward the construction and education of society. Nevertheless, *Aušra*'s significance remains exceptional in that it was the first forum in which national affiliation was consistently placed above estate-based or confessional identity, bringing together intellectuals of differing ideological positions around a shared goal.

Varpas takes up this programme but fundamentally reorients it. Romantic–heroic pathos and the rhetoric of prophetic expectation are increasingly criticised as ideologically and literarily unproductive, while poetry and journalism are redirected toward the concrete realities of the present, personal responsibility, and civic action. The figure of the prophet is gradually replaced by an imperative, polemical voice that no longer promises salvation but demands labour, commitment, and self-creation. In this way, *Varpas* marks the transition from national self-awareness to the formation of a conscious civic subject. Only later, in the early twentieth century, does Lithuanian literature – particularly in the poetry of Maironis – invest the concept of the homeland with not only social but also individual and aesthetic value, thereby paving the way for modern Lithuanian lyric poetry.

Aušra united intellectuals of differing ideological orientations on the basis of a national principle and laid the foundations for the imaginative construction of Lithuanian society, while *Varpas* reoriented this imagination toward civic action, critical engagement, and personal responsibility. Both periodicals exemplify what Puchner has described as the power of texts to act in history: literature here functions not merely as reflection, but also as a cultural practice that shapes collective horizons of action and historical subjects.

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