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# Folk Culture, Literature and Nation Building Efforts in the Romantic Age of Central Europe

*The different nation building efforts, the ideas of Romanticism and the discovery of folk literature were all strongly interdependent in recent Central European history. It is useful and enriching to discover the position of folk culture related to the beginnings of national literature and national history, as well as to recognise the common historical and literary developments in Central Europe. This article gives a short overview of this field.*

*First of all, we have to admit that Central Europe was historically delayed in many areas of social development in relation to Western Europe. Also Central European literature appears to be more provincial than that of Western Europe. Urbanisation did not become an important trend at the same time as in the West, and as a result Western urban poetical styles did not appear in Central Europe.*

## I. Sung Poems

There were no big cities with modern forms of citizen (civic) literature in Central Europe during the Middle Ages. In Central Europe, the traditional poetical form was for several centuries the sung poem. It was born in the mediæval period, but was still dominant in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century in all social classes.

The early form of the sung poem was based on exactly known folk melodies from the XVI–XVII<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are good examples of two types of these traditional sung poems.

The first type of such poems was created by combining historical stories and ballads with widely known melodies by TINÓDI LANTOS Sebestyén (1510–1556) and by several anonymous Slovak songwriters.

The other type was comprised of poems treating various topics that were combined with an appropriate melody suggested by the poet herself or himself just after the title of the poem (for example: “according to the melody of Z.”).

Poets of lasting importance in this field were the famous Magyar (Hungarian) valiant, BALASSI (BALASSA) Bálint (1554–1594), and two renowned Slovak poets, JÁN SILVÁN (1493–1573) and Eliaš LÁNI (1570–1618).

In the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century the style of poems were light, melodic and prosodic, but without exact melody. Time was not measured and this style was based on the stress (emphasis) of sentences and syllables.

In Magyar and Slovak literature and poetry, the stress is on the first syllable, called Magyar stress style or Slovak syllable counting style. There is a huge lack of comparative research about the parallel development of the Magyar and Slovak poetic styles.

These similarities show traditionally strong cultural interdependence between early Slovak and Magyar literatures, similarities which also appear in the styles and topics of poems themselves.

## II. Old Poetic Style Turned to Romanticism

Preceding Romanticism, the next phase in literary development began as poets gradually left behind the previous old style and entered a period where the imitation of folk poetry was fashionable.

The national romanticism in Central Europe was based on the development of provincial folklore in previous centuries. Some multilingual songbooks revealed the transition from the old sung poems to the modern Romantic poetry.

Notable examples of this development were the poems of Matěj HOLKO (1719–1785) and PÁLÓCZI HORVÁTH Ádám (1760–1820). This last phase before Romanticism appeared in the region of Central Europe and followed external, not internal, influences.

## III. Foreign Romantic Inspirations

The earliest prominent inspiration for Central European literature was Johann Gottfried (VON) HERDER (1744–1803); he emphasized the national heroic past as a guarantee justifying the common glorious future. For HERDER, folk culture was most importantly a tool for joining world culture.

The other most important German Romantic literary influence was Johann Wolfgang (VON) GOETHE (1749–1832). In both HERDER and GOETHE’s writings, several countries of Central Europe appear as

exotic lands with rich folk cultures, providing inspirational forces for the combination of folkloric elements with high poetry.

The second phase of Western Romanticism appeared with the GRIMM brothers, Jacob Ludwig Carl GRIMM (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Carl GRIMM (1786–1859). They presented national folk culture originating from old roots as a unique traditional quality without any ambition of universalism.

These two developments reached Central Europe at the same time, from the early XIX<sup>th</sup> century on, because of the late development of the region. Both KÖLCSEY Ferenc (1790–1838) and Ludovít ŠTÚR (1815–1856) highlighted the unique quality of folk culture and incorporated it into a much broader context.

#### IV. The Definition of Folk Culture in the Period of Romanticism

When exploring the transformation of the classical academic literary style into what became known as Romanticism, it is observed that the origin of Romantic folk culture can be traced back to the *Poeta Classis*, those educated in colleges.

The classic style described the homeland and home culture, and many elements of folklore appeared in background. Typical examples of this literary development are the poets BERZSENYI Dániel (1776–1836) and Ján HOLLÝ (1785–1849).

We can see classical poetic expressions in Ján HOLLÝ's works: one example is the motif of people from different Slovak villages coming to a fountain. They arrive with unique dresses and folk customs and receive a life-force from the water in the well, a symbol of the nation's future. This is a classical topic with a number of Romanticist elements.

The folklore of Romanticism was characterized by paradoxes: national, international, provincial and European elements used side by side. National motifs and allegories naturally produced conflicts among the newly-born modern nations.

Pieces of folk literature, however, headed in the same direction: establishing national literatures in each respective national group. In fact, the Central European historical figures crucial for the literary process of nation building inspired each other in manifold ways.

There were, however, regional differences concerning the literary developments of the nations in Central Europe. In Czech, Magyar

and Polish literature, Romanticism appears in the 1810s and 1820s; in Slovak literature it appears two to three decades later – from the 1840's on.

#### V. The Results and Inconsistencies of Romanticism

One of the main elements in Romanticist Central European literature was the cult of songs. As the melody of folk songs was important in the XVI–XVII<sup>th</sup> centuries, some poets, the Magyar CSOKONAI VITÉZ Mihály (1773–1805), the Slovak Ján CHALUPKA (1791–1871) and the Serb–Magyar МИХАИЛО ВИТКОВИЋ (Mihailo VITKOVIĆ, VITKOVICS Mihály, 1778–1829), also wrote in the style of folk songs in the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Following their example, scholarly research and the collection of folk literature slowly became fashionable. But many of the main efforts may have been manipulated, since it was the poets themselves who often created “original” folk culture.

These poets identified themselves with the past of their nation and people, with the aim of creating a brighter future. They sought to create dreams by producing myths based on popular folk culture, instead of focusing on historical credibility and selecting the most accurate sources of historical information.

New pseudo-folklore was born in this period, inspired by authentic poems and songs: for example, Magyar pseudo-kuruc poems by THALY Kálmán (1839–1909), or various Slovak (and Polish) myths of Juraj JÁNOŠIK (1688–1713). The popular pseudo-heroes at times became national idols at last, forming the national historical and literary canon.

The collections of folk poems were started by the Bosnian Serb Вук Стефановић КАРАЏИЋ (Vuk Stefanović KARADŽIĆ, 1787–1864). His collection is a faithful overview of the original Serb folk poems and heroic songs with old traditional poetic forms and historical folk melodies.

He was one of the most important nation builders among the Serbs, and a main establisher of the modern Yugoslav languages known today. He was, however, also the first among those who collected historical and true folklore and did not focus on producing pseudo-myths.

This endeavour was rather untypical in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century in the Balkans (South East Europe) and in Central Europe, since historical authenticity was not an important issue for collectors.

## VI. The Role of German Language

The wide-spread German language was one of the important communication tools among the increasingly isolated folk collectors with national ambitions. We can determine three major groups in this field.

### 1. *Gesamtmonarchie* Patriotism

Austrian and German *Gesamtmonarchie* patriots were in favour of a unified Habsburg Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. This group comprised not only Austrian and German aristocrats, but also Magyar and Slovak nobles.

Important examples are MAILÁTH (MAJLÁTH) János (1786–1855), MEDNYÁNSZKY Alajos (1784–1844) and Samuel ROŽNAY (1787–1815), who wrote in Slovak, translated Slovak poems into Magyar and Magyar poems into German.

### 2. *Hungarus* Identity

Citizens with a *Hungarus* identity were patriots committed to their homeland (Patria, Vaterland, Motherland): the Kingdom of Hungary. The divergent nation building movements appeared as a threat to their patriotic feelings.

E. Eugen WESSELY from Vinkovci (present-day Croatia) translated the best of the Serbian folk collection of Вук Стефановић КАРАЏИЋ (Vuk Stefanović KARADŽIĆ) into German.

The poetry of Nikolaus LENAU (Nikolaus Franz Niembsch Edler VON STREHLENAU, 1802–1850) is considered part of Austrian and German literature, but he also wrote poems inspired by Magyar land and folk motives and by the famous Czech Hussite leader Jan ŽIŽKA z Trocnova a Kalicha (1360–1424).

### 3. Jewish Transnational Identity

In the region, there were also emancipated Jewish intellectuals who had a special kind of transnational identity. They were always fully loyal to the given political system that emancipated them.

At first they wrote literature in German as the main intermediary language, and they were not in favour of any kind of nation building efforts. After the Great Compromise in 1867 in Hungary, more and more Jews joined the dominant Magyar nation building movement and helped to compose Magyar pseudo-folk myths.

A famous poet, Siegfried KAPPER (1821–1879) from Smíchov, Bohemia, became known as a translator of Czech, Moravian, Slovak and Serb folk poems into German. His work with folk literature was extremely important, as it made the best sources available in German.

### 4. Loss of Authenticity and Making New Myths

German poetry in Central Europe had several positive but also many negative and controversial elements. It built bridges among national folk aspirations, which was an essential contribution in a fragmented multilingual environment.

The loss of authenticity appeared in a special form in German poetry also. The forms and styles of poems in German were usually significantly different than the originals; they were not literary translations but *Nachklängen* (reminiscences).

The above mentioned Siegfried KAPPER is a vital example of this phenomenon: he modified the structure of rhymes according to the rule of German poetical forms and norms. These poems lost their rhythms and natural harmony.

The loss of authenticity and the creation of new and false preconceptions was a direct consequence: for example, the romantic ideal view of a Slovak village in sentimental sad songs was established.

Similarly, the notions of the Magyar *puszta*, *betyár*, *gulyás* and *csikós* simplified and idealized the view of the Magyar lands and their people, at the same time making false preconceptions concerning the nation.

## VII. The End of Romanticism and Modern Urban Lifestyle

By means of social development and rapid urbanization, national realism developed from national romanticism as an answer to modern lifestyle in newly-born municipal communities, cities and metropolises.

On the other hand, as a result of the consolidation and establishment of the first major wave of nation building efforts, folklore was used less and less as a major nation building tool.

Searching for the authenticity of folk culture customs through exact scholarly research and scientific methods closed the age of national romanticism for good. As a result, at the turn of the XIX–XX<sup>th</sup> centuries, the need for authenticity in folklore became more obvious.

## VIII. The Birth of Folklore as Scientific Ethnography

ERDÉLYI János (1814–1868) did vital research on the authentic melodies of poems. He inspired BARTÓK Béla (1881–1945) and KODÁLY Zoltán (1882–1967), who collected folk music from Central European nations.

They created new research methods without any kind of social or political motivations, solely based on the aim of discovering the authenticity of folk culture from relevant sources in the countryside, far from the newly-developed urban centres.

Their works launched new methods not only in scientific research and methodology but also in poetry and music, and their efforts suscited new forms inspired by authentic folk forms and styles.

*Contemporary developments do not belong to the topic of this paper, which hopes to have described in short the interrelationship of the discovery and manipulation of folk culture and its relation to nation building efforts.*

### Suggested Reading

FRIED István, *A névadás lehetsége: nemzetiség, régió, Európa* (The Possibility of Giving Names: Ethnicity, Region, Europe). Bratislava–Pozsony, 2004.

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