

## Two Canonical Soviet Authors in the Post-Soviet Lithuanian School System: Petras Cvirka and Salomėja Nėris

Du sovietinio kanono autoriai posovietinėje Lietuvos mokykloje: Petras Cvirka ir Salomėja Nėris

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*Abstract:* The article examines the place of two Lithuanian writers, Salomėja Nėris (1909–1947) and Petras Cvirka (1904–1945), in the high school canon of Lithuanian literature in the post-Soviet period. First, the canonisation of these writers in the Soviet Lithuanian school system is analysed, or more precisely, in school curricula and textbooks from that time. Afterwards, we examine the revision of their canonical position after the restoration of Lithuania's independence (1990). The research applies the socio-cultural methodological approach of canon research. A large sample of sources is used: school curricula, textbooks, readers, press publications, and other contextual materials. The study has revealed the different evaluation of Nėris and Cvirka in post-Soviet schools, which is largely due to differences in writers' biographies. Since Cvirka consistently held and expressed left-wing and later pro-Soviet views in his work throughout his life, his oeuvre gradually disappeared from the upper school curriculum as the de-sovietisation of Lithuanian culture took place in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Nėris,

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on the contrary, has retained her central position in the school canon in the post-Soviet period. When her last collection of poems was first published in the late 20th century, in the order Nėris' herself had wanted, it became possible to reposition certain aspects of her life and work.

*Keywords:* literary canon, high school, Soviet Lithuania, Salomėja Nėris, Petras Cvirka.

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*Anotacija:* Straipsnyje analizuojama dviejų lietuvių rašytojų, Salomėjos Nėries (1909–1947) ir Petro Cvirkos (1904–1945), vieta posovietinės Lietuvos mokykliniame literatūros kanone. Pirmiausia aptariama šių rašytojų kanonizacija sovietinės Lietuvos švietimo sistemoje, konkrečiai – to meto vyresniųjų klasių literatūros programose ir vadovėliuose. Vėliau nagrinėjama jų kanoninės pozicijos revizija po Lietuvos nepriklausomybės atkūrimo 1990 metais. Tyrime taikoma sociokultūrinė kanonų tyrimų metodologinė prieiga. Naudojamasi didele šaltinių įvairove: mokyklinėmis programomis, vadovėliais, skaitiniais, publikacijomis spaudoje, kita kontekstine medžiaga. Tyrimas atskleidė, kad Nėries ir Cvirkos vertinimas posovietinėje mokykloje skiriasi. Didžiąja dalimi tai lėmė jų biografijos skirtumai. Kadangi Cvirka visą gyvenimą nuosekliai laikėsi ir savo kūryboje išreiškė kairiąsias, vėliau prosovietines pažiūras, vykstant lietuvių kultūros desovietizacijos procesams XX a. pabaigoje – XXI a. pradžioje jo kūriniai palaipsniui pradingo iš vyresniųjų klasių mokyklinių programų. Nėris – priešingai, posovietiniu laikotarpiu išsaugojo savo centrinę poziciją mokykliniame kanone. Kai XX a. pabaigoje pirmą kartą publikuotas jos paskutinis eilių rinkinys tokia seka, kokios pageidavo pati poetė, tapo įmanoma naujai sudėlioti jos gyvenimo ir kūrybos akcentus.

*Raktažodžiai:* literatūros kanonas, vidurinė mokykla, Sovietų Lietuva, Salomėja Nėris, Petras Cvirka.

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In this paper, we analyse the positions in the post-Soviet Lithuanian school system of Petras Cvirka (1909–1947) and Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945), the two most canonised 20th-century Lithuanian writers during the Soviet period. Both authors entered the school curriculum at the same time, and their canonisation during the Soviet period occurred synchronically. Their recognition in the school canon reached its zenith in the late Stalinist years: Cvirka was considered the greatest Lithuanian prose writer, Nėris the greatest Lithuanian poet. However, with the beginning of desovietisation at the end of the 20th century, the evaluation of the literary legacy of these two writers began increasingly to diverge: Cvirka gradually disappeared from the school canon, while Nėris maintained a stable position. In our research, we have aimed to explain the dynamics of the canonical positions of Cvirka and Nėris in the post-Soviet school system, by asking the following

questions: What were the reasons for the diverging evaluations of these two writers? What strategies did the authors of school curricula and textbooks apply in the teaching of Soviet writers in schools in independent Lithuania (from 1990)?

In our work, we apply the methodology of research on the literary canon developed in the theoretical framework of the sociology of literature. John Guillory was the first to state that school has a greater impact on the formation of the canon than any other institution in the literary field (Guillory 1993; Guillory 2006: 239–240). The principles for canonisation in the selection and evaluation of texts instilled in the teaching of literature in schools reach all groups in society without exception. In addition, because of the compulsory final examinations, the cultural power of the school as a canonising institution is also increased. Drawing on the methodology of the descriptive studies of the canon, we analyse educational canonisation as a socio-cultural process, during which the political and cultural elites select what they view as a body of significant work, ensure its dissemination, and create an interpretative code for the reading of those works.

According to Guillory, the formation of a canon is based on the totality of the authors and their works, and not on individual authors or works. A certain code of values determines the internal structure of the canon; as this code changes, the canon itself is restructured. The structural change is connected not only to the inclusion or exclusion of individual works from the canon. The degree of a work's canonicity can change with a shift in the code, and it can be assigned meanings that are different to those that were in use up to that point in time. Thus, school as a canonising institution subordinates the historical specificity of an individual work to the code of the canon. It is in fact due to these homogenising methods, according to Guillory, that school curricula are capable of neutralising the heterodoxies of certain canonical works which contradict the code of the canon. The canonisation of Cvirka and Nėris in the school system is an iconic example of how the school curriculum adapts to the changing political conjuncture and the socio-cultural changes by altering the position of these writers in the canon in selecting their works and forming the specific guidelines for interpreting them in curricula and textbooks.

This paper comprises two sections. In the first one, we analyse the strategies applied during the Soviet period in the attempt to make Cvirka and Nėris major classics of Soviet Lithuanian literature. In the second part, we analyse the arguments that were used to support the change in their positions in the

post-Soviet school canon. The focus is on the school (de)canonisation of these authors in the years 1990 to 2000, because it was at that time that the code of values of the post-Soviet literary canon came to be established.

Due to constraints of length, the focus in our article is on teaching these two writers in senior secondary school, where their works are presented and analysed in the general context of the history of Lithuanian literature. The extent of reading the work of Cvirka and Nėris in the middle classes of secondary school is only mentioned briefly. Over the eight decades analysed in this paper, the structure of school itself (the number of secondary school classes) has changed more than once. For the sake of clarity, these changes are presented succinctly in the paper, where appropriate.

### **Cvirka and Nėris: classics of Soviet Lithuanian literature**

In contemporary literary studies, it is customary to treat the canon as the consensus of a specific (national or Western) community as regards the corpus of the most valuable works of literature. In other words, the canon is seen as a socio-cultural phenomenon, the result of society's negotiations on value criteria at a particular time. However, this approach to totalitarian systems should be applied with reservations. Public debate or negotiations are hardly possible, because all value decisions are made, or at least sanctioned, by the political elite. For this reason, the school literary canon in a totalitarian system is inevitably ideologically motivated (Malygin 2012: 419). One important cultural function of a literary canon is to form the collective identity of members of a society. This is particularly important in totalitarian societies in which a centralised compulsory educational system is used for the indoctrination of the younger generations, and in this way contributes to the formation of a 'new society'. In the school system in Soviet Lithuania, literature (as well as other school subjects, such as history, geography, social sciences and even biology) was used as an effective tool for communist education.<sup>1</sup> The importance of literary education in the USSR is also

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1 'The aim of the literature syllabus in secondary schools has to be educational and communist in approach: literature has to form the Marxist-Leninist world-view of pupils, has to help schools "to prepare comprehensively educated, active, conscious builders of a communist

attested to by the fact that the Education Commissariat (the equivalent of the Ministry of Education) of occupied Lithuania, as a matter of urgency, removed all literature textbooks and readers published before 1940 (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos 1940–1941 m. m.* 1940: 5–6). Throughout the whole Soviet period, the Communist Party was scrupulous in ensuring that the only literary works selected to reach pupils were ideologically correct and appropriately interpreted.

With the new Marxist-Leninist framework in place, it became necessary not only to reconsider the selection and evaluation of the literary heritage, but also to construct a new narrative of the development of Lithuanian literature. During the period of the national movement and the First Lithuanian Republic (the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century), the developing historiography of Lithuanian literature was strongly influenced by the ideology of modern Lithuanian nationalism. For this reason, the national canon at that time was made up mostly of writers who inspired or were directly involved in the Lithuanian national movement. This structure of the literary canon was inconvenient for Soviet ideology, which sought to fundamentally transform the value system and the collective memory of Lithuanian society. That is why the academic institutions of Soviet Lithuania reinterpreted the history of Lithuanian literature, and at the same time restructured the national canon in such a way that writers of the national movement would be moved from the centre of the canon to the periphery and replaced by socialist writers.

There were not yet any real socialist writers in Lithuania in 1940, and so the political elite had to ‘create’ them quickly from those that were at hand. The most suitable for this purpose were members of the left-wing avant-garde group *Trečias frontas* (The Third Front), who in 1940 enthusiastically supported the Soviet occupation and Lithuania’s incorporation into the USSR.<sup>2</sup> The most talented writers in this group were the prose writer Petras Cvirka and

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society, to educate pupils in the spirit of Soviet patriotism, in the spirit of the strengthening of the friendship of nations, completely faithful to the socialist Fatherland, to the Party of Lenin and Stalin” (from the plenary resolution of the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party [Bolsheviks] of Lithuania 1949) (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos* 1950: 53).

2 The journal *Trečias frontas* (The Third Front, 1930–1931) brought together Lithuanian writers with left-wing views. In autumn 1931, the Lithuanian military censor stopped the publication of the magazine because of its increasingly radical anti-state rhetoric. In 1940, Petras Cvirka, Antanas Venclova, Kostas Korsakas and Salomėja Nėris, the best-known of the journal’s contributors, actively participated in Lithuania’s sovietisation.

the poet Salomėja Nėris. At the time, both were well regarded by readers and professional writers.

During the Soviet period, the fact of Lithuania's occupation was not acknowledged, the political events of 1940 and 1941 being interpreted as a proletarian revolution carried out by Lithuania's communist-led working class (Būtėnas 1992: 20). This interpretation of events was shaped by Cvirka and Nėris in their public statements and literary works. They actively agitated for Lithuania's incorporation into the USSR in 1940, with both going to Moscow to participate in the congress of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, during which Lithuania was officially incorporated into the USSR. After the Nazis invaded Lithuania in June 1941, both writers fled to the USSR, and there continued to publish work expounding Soviet propaganda. They both returned to Lithuania after the German withdrawal, and died shortly afterwards (Nėris in 1945, Cvirka in 1947).

Because of the exceptionally stringent ideological selection process during the Stalinist era, only a very small number of living writers, those loyal to the Communist Party, were able to enter school curricula. Only a few of them were talented. This explains why Cvirka and Nėris were promoted in the postwar years by the Soviet authorities as the central, most important Lithuanian writers. Their early deaths contributed to the scale of their canonisation. The totalitarian Soviet system followed closely the actions of those working in the arts, and punished those considered guilty of the slightest ideological transgression, by restricting the dissemination of their work. (For example, the work of all Lithuanian émigré writers who had left Lithuania for the West in 1944 as the Red Army was approaching became unavailable to readers during the Stalinist period.) It was easier to deal with the dead, since there was no longer any fear they would make any ideological mistakes at some time in the future and compromise the regime that had canonised them.

Cvirka's background was particularly suitable for his role as a classic of socialist literature. Coming from a poor rural family, in his realist prose works he depicted mostly the everyday existence of Lithuania's rural poor, which he knew best. In the 1930s, his exploration of topical social issues, his lyrical narrative style, and his lively colloquial language won him the acclaim of readers and critics. His novel *Žemė maitintoja* (Earth the Nourisher, 1935) was awarded a literary prize established by one of the largest Lithuanian publishers of the

time. The theme of the novel was very suitable for inclusion in the Soviet canon. In 'Earth the Nourisher', Cvirka depicted the land reform that was carried out in the interwar years in Lithuania in an emphatically negative way, depicting scenes of dire poverty. The aim of the land reform was to help rural inhabitants who were finding it most difficult to survive, but in his novel Cvirka criticises the government's agricultural policy as supposedly benefiting only the larger landowners. The novel's pessimistic ending offered no way out of the hopeless poverty in which the Lithuanian countryside had supposedly found itself. In this sense, the novel contradicted the doctrine of Socialist Realism promulgated in the USSR in 1934, which required that a work of art had to depict reality 'in its revolutionary development', and to inspire readers to believe in the victory of communism. Even works depicting the capitalist system had to describe a hopeful perspective for socialist revolution (Satkauskytė 2019: 215–216).

Despite that, the canonisation of 'Earth the Nourisher' during the Soviet period was based on its status as the first work of Lithuanian Socialist Realism. How did this happen? The literary canon of the Soviet republics was modelled on that of Soviet Russia. Just as Maxim Gorky, a pioneer of Socialist Realism, emerged at the centre of the Soviet Russian literary canon, the other republics also had to have their own Gorkys, around whom the Soviet literary canon of each republic would form. There was no better candidate for this position in Lithuanian literature than Cvirka. He was like Gorky both in his background (coming from an extremely poor family) and in his work (criticising the socially flawed capitalist system).

However, to claim the laurels of the pioneer of Lithuanian Socialist Realism, Cvirka first had to modify his novel according to the requirements of the Socialist Realism method. Just after the Soviet invasion of Lithuania in 1940, he published a new edition of the novel, in which he made his criticism of Lithuania's agricultural policy even sharper, adding a reflection on collective farming in communes, and, most importantly, he changed the final scene in the novel. In the new edition of the novel, the protagonist does not accept the prevailing situation, and joins a strike of farmers who are dissatisfied with the government's agricultural policy.

It is important to stress that all these changes first took place in 1937 in the Russian translation of 'Earth the Nourisher' (Bražėnas 1998: 315; Satkauskytė 2022: 944). This was the first translation of a work of Lithuanian literature to be

published in the USSR. In 1938, Cvirka was awarded the prize of the Writers Union of the USSR. Given that it was the Communist Party which oversaw the publication of books and the awarding of prizes in the USSR, there is no doubt that the decision to publish Cvirka's novel in Moscow had a political motive.

It was Antanas Sniečkus, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, who urged his comrade Aleksandras Bauža to translate 'Earth the Nourisher' into Russian (*Aleksandro Baužos atsiminimai* 1963: 13; Tamošaitis 2010: 95). According to Sniečkus, it was the translator himself who came up with the revolutionary ending (Bardonaitė 1983: 121). And after the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania, all the changes in the novel's Russian translation appeared in the Lithuanian edition of 1940. In 1946, the novel was revised again, but this time the changes were more of a stylistic nature. During the Soviet period, it was claimed that the changes that had found their way into the Russian translation were episodes that had been previously removed by the censors in 'bourgeois Lithuania' (*Petras Cvirka gyvenime ir kūryboje* 1953: 65; Galinis 1955: 26).<sup>3</sup> That is why it was also during the Soviet period that when publishing extracts from 'Earth the Nourisher' in school readers, the date of the first edition was shown (1935), even though the extracts themselves were from the 1946 edition.

Salomėja Nėris' literary biography also required some ideological 'editing' in the Lithuanian school system during the Soviet period. Unlike Cvirka, she grew up in a family of well-off religious farmers, had participated actively in Catholic youth organisations, and was one of the most talented and most popular poets of her generation. In 1938, she was awarded the State Literature Prize, the highest literary award in the Republic of Lithuania, for the collection of poems *Diemedžiu žydėsiu* (I'll Blossom like Wormwood). All these facts were kept quiet in schools during Soviet times, the writer's biography beginning only in 1931 with her sudden turn towards left-wing ideology when she joined the Trečias frontas literary group. Unlike Cvirka, whose world-view and work were consistently left-wing, we do not see this kind of consistency in Nėris' background and creative work. Although she sincerely admired the idea of social equality propagated by Marxism, she was far more successful in writing confessional poetry than socialist verse. In 1931, in her private correspondence with Trečias

3 It was only in the late Soviet period that the real sequence of the editing of the novel was revealed (Galinis 1984: 372–373).



frontas members, Nėris drew a line between service to the proletariat and work written according ‘to the order of the heart’:<sup>4</sup>

I also cannot promise that I will never write elegiac and individualistic poems; of course, that will be an unavoidable necessity, a sin which the majority of you, if not all, occasionally commit. Obviously, matters concerning the proletariat, the revolution, the struggle, come first. That is the work of everyone for everyone. But there are moments of leisure which belong to the individual, and I reserve those for myself (Nėris 1984: 380).

Nėris consistently maintained this division in her creative work. In the journal published by Trečias frontas and in the communist underground press, she published poems denouncing the capitalist exploiters, and after the Soviet occupation of Lithuania she praised Stalin, Lenin, the Communist Party, and the Red Army. But alongside that, she also wrote lyric poetry, lines contemplating the fragility of existence, and during the Nazi occupation when she was in the USSR she also wrote verse of despair and repentance suffused with a longing for her motherland, which was incompatible with the methods of Socialist Realism. On her return to Lithuania, following the withdrawal of the Nazis, she intended to publish the lyric poems that she ‘had reserved for herself’ in her last collection of poems. But, after a serious illness, the editors of the collection left out the ideologically inconvenient poems and radically changed the structure of the collection and the book’s title. So with the poet lying on her deathbed, her last collection came out in a form that would have been unrecognisable to her: it highlighted Soviet patriotism, hatred of the enemy, and the heroisation of the Red Army and the Soviet partisans.<sup>5</sup> These aspects were emphasised in the teaching of Nėris’ biography, and in the selection of her work in the school system during the Soviet period.

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4 This was what she intended to call the collection of work she was preparing just before her death in 1945.

5 It was only in 1957 that the editors of *Raštai* (Writings) dared to include all of Nėris’ work intended for publication in her last collection. For more on the publication of Nėris’ work in 1945–1946, see Kvietkauskas 2016, 7–33.

## A poet of struggle and victory: Nėris in the school canon during the Soviet period

Work by Nėris appears for the first time in the school curriculum in the lower years (forms 5 to 7) after the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940 (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos 1940–1941 m. m.* 1940: 11–13). A consistent historical development of literature was taught to pupils in forms 8 to 10. So we can hardly talk about her canonisation at this point. On the other hand, it is important to note that just after the Soviet occupation in 1940, all the main left-wing avant-garde authors appeared in the curriculum of the lower secondary school forms. Unlike Cvirka, who during the fateful year of 1940 became actively involved in political activities and had no time for creative work, Nėris was very productive during the first Soviet occupation. That is why most of her poems, read in school in 1940 and 1941, were her latest works published already during the Soviet period. For example, in the syllabus for form 7, *Poema apie Staliną* (A Poem about Stalin) was listed. This poem was first published in July 1940, and later as a separate publication. In August of the same year, Nėris recited it in Moscow at a session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, to which she had come as a member of the plenipotentiary commission of the People's Seimas to convey the Seimas' request for Lithuania to be admitted into the USSR. Therefore, not only was the poem a work of Soviet propaganda, its public performance also contributed to its political significance.

Similar poems implanting the cult of the Leader were written by writers from the other Soviet republics. This was an obligatory genre, a particular kind of ritual, with the purpose of integrating all of society in the USSR, cultivating loyalty to the Communist Party and its leader, and creating an idealistic image of the Soviet world (Pisch 2016: 61–64). 'A Poem about Stalin' is also important as an attempt to establish a new historical narrative of the Lithuanian nation. In the work, two parallel storylines are developed: a biography of Stalin, and the development of the Lithuanian nation from the Middle Ages. At the end of the poem these lines merge, fulfilling a scenario of 'historic inevitability' created by Marxist historiography. All the history of the Lithuanian nation is represented as a coherent path leading to the socialist revolution, supposedly having taken place in 1940. This was the historical narrative of Lithuania instilled in schools during the Stalinist period.

During the Nazi occupation (1941 to 1944), all the works of writers who supported the Soviet occupation, including Cvirka and Nėris, disappeared from school curricula. But they returned to the schools immediately after the second Soviet occupation (1944). In the postwar secondary school system, the history of literature was taught in the higher forms (5 to 8). Nėris' work was read both in the lower forms of secondary school and in the final (8th) form (under the topic 'Soviet Writers and the Great Patriotic War'), but the specific titles of the works chosen were not named in the curriculum at the time. Unlike Cvirka, who already in 1946 and 1947 had a separate topic on his work in the final-year curriculum, Nėris at the time was only mentioned in the review lesson among other Soviet authors (the only work by her that is specified is 'A Poem about Stalin') (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos 1946/47* 1946: 30). In 1948 and 1949, three more panegyric poems by Nėris written during the Soviet period were added. The poem praising Lenin 'Bolševiko kelias' (The Path of the Bolshevik, 1940) was one of them.

In this poem, the incorporation of Lithuania into the USSR is justified as its supposedly historically determined destiny. Kostas Korsakas, the most influential literary scholar of the Stalinist era, and a former member of Trečias frontas, considered this poem to be among the best examples, belonging to the so-called golden fund of Soviet Lithuanian poetry. Korsakas presents the scene in which the lyrical subject visiting the Kremlin mausoleum bursts into tears beside Lenin's remains as an example of behaviour to be followed by a Soviet citizen: 'With the real sensitivity and sincerity of a lyric poet, Nėris experiences at Lenin's coffin *every Soviet person's relationship with the great leader of the revolution, a genius of humanity*' (italics added, Korsakas 1949: 328). The expressive public demonstration of pain as a characteristic manifestation of the Soviet emotional culture could indeed be observed later at the funeral ceremonies of the leaders of the Communist Party of the USSR.

Even though both of Nėris' poems praising the leaders of the Communist Party became the primary works representing the poet's oeuvre, pupils did not read the originals of these works, but their 1946 expurgated versions (*Literatūros chrestomatija XI klasei* 1954: 225–234). After the poet's death, Antanas Venclova, a former member of Trečias frontas, edited Nėris' work extensively. During the war, and even more so after the poet's death, the authorities had foreseen for her a position as the foremost Lithuanian poet in the Soviet canon. She was to become an example to all the postwar generation of Soviet poets, and for this

reason her creative work had to be ideologically beyond reproach. Venclova was even criticised by the Party for insufficiently editing the poet's work from an ideological point of view in preparing Nėris' *Raštai* (Writings). According to Korsakas, that 'could mislead lovers of Salomėja Nėris' poetry, and in particular the new generation' (*Rašytojas pokario metais* 1991: 157).

A significant change in Nėris' (and Cvirka's) canonisation took place in 1950 and 1951: 14 to 15 lessons were devoted to her work in the lower secondary school forms (5 to 7), and 10 lessons in the last form (11). She was presented in the school curricula of this period for the first time as the most talented poet of the Lithuanian nation. It is likely that it was also the Stalin Prize (first degree), awarded to her (posthumously) in 1947, that helped the poet achieve the highest acclaim possible at that time (Rostovaitė 1955: 48). This was the highest award in the USSR given at that time for achievements in science, technology, military science, literature, art, and work organisation. Nėris was the first Lithuanian writer to receive such recognition.

In 1950, the list of compulsory works by Nėris in the school curriculum was greatly expanded. All the compulsory works listed were propaganda verse; the main focus, as before, was on poetry from the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania and the war years. In 1952, in the final oral exam, there was a requirement to know by heart an extract from 'A Poem about Stalin', and in 1953 an extract from the poem 'The Path of the Bolshevik' (*Vidurinių mokyklų brandos atestato egzaminų bilietai 1950/51* 1951: 15; *Vidurinių mokyklų brandos atestato egzaminų bilietai 1951/52* 1952: 13; *Vidurinių mokyklų brandos atestato egzaminų bilietai 1951/52* 1953: 14–15).

The selection of poems published in the reader followed the curriculum (about 30 of her poems were included in the 1953 and 1954 editions, the number and selection differing slightly). What dominates here are socialist, anti-fascist poems, the cult of the leaders of the Communist Party of the USSR, and the heroisation of the Soviet partisans and the Red Army.

A two-volume edition of Nėris' writings was published in 1946 in a print run of 15,000, which was huge for those times. All four of her prewar collections of verse were included in it. So teachers at the time were able to present a wider range of the poet's creative work if they wished. Nevertheless, taking into account the postwar repressions, it is unlikely that many of those teachers would have undertaken to go beyond the prescribed thematic boundaries of Nėris' work. During the Stalinist period, the work of teachers was constantly checked by

inspectors from the Ministry of Education, with some teachers, and even pupils, monitoring ‘ideological mistakes’ made in lessons and reporting them to the security services (Holmes 2004: 64). The late appearance of readers, textbooks and academic histories of literature during the Soviet period was connected to a sense of fear. No one wanted to risk incurring the displeasure of the Communist Party, because of what might be judged an unsuitable selection or treatment of creative work. It was particularly dangerous to evaluate the so-called bourgeois period. Even the writer Venclova, loyal to the Soviets, who had edited Nėris’ previously mentioned *Raštai*, was severely criticised by the Party for incorrectly interpreting the writer’s pre-Soviet life and work (Sniečkus 1948: 24–25).

In the decade after the end of the war, Nėris’ central position in Soviet Lithuanian literature was increasingly strengthened. The focus was placed on the cult of the Party leader and Soviet heroes (revolutionaries and partisans), with priority being given to poems in which Nėris talks in the voice of the collective, that is, the Lithuanian working class. Her distinctive lyric poetry (and it was in this area that she achieved the greatest artistic heights) was completely ignored in schools in the Stalinist years.

Nėris not only made a significant contribution to Lithuania’s sovietisation in establishing the cult of Stalin and Lenin, she herself (like Cvirka) was turned into a cult object during the Soviet period. Her canonisation intensified especially after her early death in 1945. In the grandiose state funeral ceremony, a representative of the People’s Commissariat of Education solemnly pledged that Soviet pupils would be brought up in the spirit of her verse:

Your songs will be heard in our Soviet schools.

Your poetic words will be the good custodian and teacher in our work.

Your poetic mastery will be a source and example to us of work and creativity (Dagys 1946: 30).

According to the original idea proposed by the Council of the People’s Commissars of the USSR, Nėris’ grave beside the Museum of Culture (later renamed the War Museum) should have been the beginning of the pantheon of Soviet Lithuanian artists (Vairas 1946: 44).<sup>6</sup> In 1955, a monument by the

<sup>6</sup> This idea was later abandoned. Cvirka and other writers who died in the postwar years were buried in the Rasos Cemetery in Vilnius. In 1972, a Pantheon of Artists (The Artists’ Hill) began to be formed in the Antakalnis Cemetery in Vilnius.

sculptor Bernardas Bučas, the poet's husband, was unveiled by her grave. According to the memoirs of contemporaries, the sculptor had designed a poetic model of the sculpture, but the Lithuanian minister of culture had criticised it. The authorities wanted to see Nėris in the role of a revolutionary, and that was how she was depicted in the final version of the monument (Markauskaitė 2016: 123). With one hand on her hip, the other by her side with a book in her hand, and one foot placed forward, Nėris in Bučas' sculpture corresponded to the image of 'the poet of struggle and victory'. This was the title Korsakas gave to his 1945 essay on Nėris (Korsakas 1949: 344).

After her death, more monuments<sup>7</sup> were erected, celebrations of the anniversaries of her birth were organised, a memorial museum<sup>8</sup> was established, a documentary was made,<sup>9</sup> and memoirs were collected and published. Her name was given to schools, streets and collective farms in various parts of Lithuania. The increase in the scale of her canonical status is also evidenced by how much of her work was published: compared to the interwar years, the print runs of her publications grew tenfold (*Salomėja Nėris 1904–1945* 1955: 189). As with Cvirka, the dissemination of her work throughout the USSR played a role in her achieving a central position in the Lithuanian literary canon in the school system (her Soviet patriotic and anti-Hitler wartime poetry was translated into the languages of other Soviet republics). Not long after her death, Salomėja Nėris was awarded the USSR state prize for *Moŭ kraŭ* (My Land, 1947), a collection of her wartime verse translated into Russian, while in 1954 she was awarded the title of People's Poet of the Lithuanian SSR. This was the very highest recognition that could be conferred in those times.

After Nikita Khrushchev's condemnation of the cult of Stalin in his speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, and with the beginning of destalinisation and the so-called 'thaw', there was also a relaxation of ideological pressure in education. The changes affected the teaching of literature in schools: more attention began to be paid to the aesthetics and artistic attributes of works,

7 In 1964, a memorial stone to Nėris was unveiled in the village of Kiršai, her birthplace. In 1974, a bust (by Vladas Vildžiūnas) was erected in her honour beside the Salomėja Nėris School in Vilnius.

8 In 1962, a memorial museum dedicated to the memory of Nėris opened in Palemonas (in a suburb of Kaunas).

9 The documentary film about Nėris *Lakštingala negali nečiulbėti* (A Nightingale Cannot but Sing, 1964, directed by Antanina Pavlova).

with criticism made of the overly dogmatic, sociologised approach to literature and its purpose, which predominated under Stalin.

In the period from 1954 to 1988, Nėris maintained a more or less stable position in school curricula (from 15 lessons in the curriculum in 1955 to 12 lessons in 1987). With the beginning of destalinisation, attention was drawn to the lyrical, romantic dimension of her work, and the folkloristic motifs of verse were highlighted. However, works with Soviet ideology continued to dominate in the curriculum (the poem ‘The Path of the Bolshevik’, verse about the war and Soviet patriotism). Her ‘Poem about Stalin’ was removed from school curricula and textbooks only in 1965, almost a decade after the condemnation of the cult of Stalin. This shows the inertia that was characteristic of the development of the school canon.

No literature textbooks were published in Lithuania during the Soviet years up to almost the end of the 1950s. A textbook covering the history of the new, Soviet, Lithuanian literature appeared even later in 1960. The long-time editor of this textbook was the teacher and literary historian Lioginas Šepkus (1924–2023). A huge part of this textbook (almost a third<sup>10</sup>) comprised sections on the lives and work of Nėris and Cvirka as key figures in Soviet literature and the school canon. The importance of this textbook was great, since because of the monopoly enjoyed by the official state publishers, there were no alternatives to it during the Soviet period in Lithuania. It should be added that, besides his textbook, Šepkus also contributed to other school publications which had an influence on the reception of Soviet literature. The clear position of one author and one textbook hardly changing over many years contributed to the relatively inert teaching of literature in schools.

Šepkus, the textbook’s author mentioned above, identified lyricism as Nėris’ most characteristic attribute. Her most important creative power, according to him, was her ability to combine opposing elements: ‘a fragile lyricism with the breadth of feeling of folklore, subtlety and gentleness with heroism, simplicity and succinctness, together with picturesqueness’ (Šepkus 1958: 34). The greater meaning given to the lyrical, romantic wellspring became the essential difference in comparison with what had been taught in schools during the years under Stalin. But what determined this?

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10 In the first edition (1960), 97/291 pages were devoted to these two writers, and in the last edition (1983) 83/231 pages.

At the beginning of the Soviet period, romanticism was criticised by the communist regime, which stipulated the only new literary direction that could be taken, strict Socialist Realism. At the same time as the cult of Stalin was condemned, the overly dogmatic and sociologised approach to literature was also criticised. The romantic side of literary works was rehabilitated and slowly regained its importance (Kubilius 1990: 200–231). The change in the reception of Nėris' poetry was also stimulated (and partly legitimised) by academic research, the most important of which was a monograph on Nėris' work by the well-known literary scholar Donatas Sauka (1929–2015), published in 1957. In it, the author criticised the one-sidedness of the poet's reception: Soviet criticism accentuated the political and social significance of Nėris' work, but ignored her intimate lyric verse (Sauka 1957: 5–6).

In the first edition of *Lietuvių literatūros vadovėlis* (III dalis) (Lithuanian Literature Textbook [part 3]) for secondary schools, Nėris is presented as the most famous and the most talented Lithuanian poet, as she was during the Stalinist era. Although the textbook's author did look back at her early work, he emphasised that there were no social motifs in it, and that the feelings and love of life of the poet (who was 'still immature') were dominant then. Later on in the textbook, poetry characterised by social criticism received the most attention, and the realism and revolutionary rhetoric in her poems were accentuated. Despite this, the textbook's author admitted (!) that 'the poet was less successful in writing a declarative, agitational poem than a subtle lyrical one' (Šėpkus 1960: 83).

The turning point in the curriculum, in both the wider sense and in the specific case of Nėris, is considered to be 1970. The fundamental structural change in the curriculum of 1970 is that the genre principle began to be used in teaching the course to form 11, and this then allowed for more attention to be paid to the aesthetic aspects of creative work. Poems that are more artistic appear in the curriculum, not counting the straightforwardly ideological ones still left in, with a greater emphasis on nature and national motifs, the joy of youth, the song-like quality, and homesickness, as well as on composition and versification (*Aštuonmečių ir vidurinių mokyklų programos. Lietuvių kalba ir literatūra IV–XI klasei* 1970: 59–60). That said, the duality of Nėris' poetry continued to be accentuated: the combination of a romantic world-view and social criticism, 'an organic synthesis of revolutionary themes and lyrical experiences' (*Aštuonmečių ir vidurinių mokyklų programos. Lietuvių kalba ir literatūra IV–XI klasei* 1972: 72).



A new edition of Šepkus' *Lietuvių literatūros vadovėlis XI kl.* (Lithuanian Literature Textbook for Form 11), in conformity with the new curriculum, came out in 1970. Only three monographic sections remained in the textbook, two of which were devoted to the work of Nėris and Cvirka. In the new textbook, more attention was placed on the lyrical, neo-romantic side of her work, and the emphasis on ideology in her biography was reduced. In the description of her stylistic traits, the text noted her 'romantic flights and realistic concreteness', and a greater emphasis was put on the interlinking of the romantic elements in poetry with (Socialist) Realist ones.

### **A pioneer of Socialist Realism: Cvirka during the Soviet era in the Lithuanian school system**

The work of Cvirka, like that of Nėris, first appeared in school curricula after the Soviet occupation in 1940. Four short stories and an extract (unspecified) from 'Earth the Nourisher' were read in the lower forms of secondary school (forms 5 to 7) (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos 1940–1941* 1940: 11–13). According to the communist ideological narrative, pre-Soviet Lithuania was depicted as a fascist state ruled over by capitalist exploiters of the people. Accordingly, Cvirka was also presented in readings for form 5 as a progressive writer who in childhood experienced a great deal of hardship, and for this reason he depicted the lives of the poor in his writings (*Į naują gyvenimą* 1940: 139). The extract from 'Earth the Nourisher' presented in the readings was chosen to make a point, as it allowed children to identify with a boy of their own age depicted in the text, and who because of his father's debts is forced into service on an estate. A dramatic scene in which a falling log smashes the child's head was intended to show the brutality of the capitalist system. This extract from the novel would later be used in successive editions of readers (Iešmanta, Mikutaitis 1949: 158–164; Iešmanta, Mikutaitis 1950: 156–162, etc).

With the beginning of the Nazi occupation, Cvirka's writings disappeared from the school curriculum, as did Nėris', but they returned immediately after the second Soviet occupation in 1944. This time, his work was integrated not only into the curriculum of the lower forms, but also into that of the upper ones. Cvirka's life and work were taught in the final 8th form. Three lessons

were devoted to the study of the novel 'Earth the Nourisher' from a particular point of view as set out in the curriculum ('the settler under the oppression of bourgeois land reform; the development of the class consciousness of workers' [*Vidurinių mokyklų programos 1946/47* 1946: 29]).

The importance of Cvirka's canonical status grew steadily in the school curriculum during the Stalinist years. In the 1948 to 1949 school year, 8 lessons were devoted to the study of 'Earth the Nourisher' in form 8. The growth in attention to Cvirka's novel could have been connected to the mass collectivisation of agriculture and the establishment of collective farms (Terleckas 2020; Terleckas 2021; Pocius 2018; Pocius 2019). Because the rural population did not want to switch from individual to collective farming, the Soviet authorities did everything they could to persuade them, and, beginning in 1949, to punish those who refused to join the collective farms. Cvirka's 'Earth the Nourisher' (the 1940 and 1946 editions) promoted collective farming as socially more just and productive. For this reason, it is likely that in increasing the number of lessons devoted to the study of this work, those in charge of educational policy hoped to change the views of the younger generation towards collective farms. With the same aim in mind, in 1950 and 1951, the curriculum for the upper classes was supplemented by Cvirka's artistically worthless idyllic short stories about the happy and carefree life of those working on collective farms (the stories 'Daina' [The Song] and 'Deputatas' [The Deputy] were both published in 1947).

Parallel to the growing number of works chosen, the number of lessons devoted to Cvirka also grew. In 1950, 17 lessons in all were devoted to Cvirka in the lower secondary school forms (5 to 7), and 10 lessons in the final 11th form.<sup>11</sup> During this period, Cvirka was already regarded as the most important 20th-century Lithuanian prose writer.

In the late Stalinist years, the interpretation of 'Earth the Nourisher' was increasingly distorted, emphasising 'the development of the class consciousness of the working people and the struggle for a socialist life (Juras Tarutis in the final edition of the novel)' (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos* 1950: 122). Nevertheless, even in the 1946 edition of the novel, there is no mention of socialism. Despite this, pupils were taught that the farmers' strikes that took place between 1935 and 1937 that were referred to in the final scene were a socialist revolution. In fact,

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11 In 1950, the number of forms in secondary schools was increased to 11.

the farmers had demanded that economic conditions be improved and elections to the Seimas be held, but they were not led by the communist underground. So during the Stalinist period, pupils were taught to see in the novel something that was not in fact there. This was all part of the Soviet government's consistent educational policy in its aim to rewrite the (interwar) history of Lithuania in a way that was favourable to it.

With the increase in tensions between the USSR and the USA after the Berlin blockade of 1950 and 1951, lists of compulsory works of literature were supplemented by writings of Cvirka that were critical of the US capitalist system and racial policy, including his satirical novel *Frank Kruk* (1934), which took on a new importance during the Cold War. In the earliest collection of readings for the 11th form to be published after the war (the first edition came out in 1953), selections from the novel were chosen in order to reveal the amoral capitalist system and racism, contrary to the principles of humanity. An especially brutal scene in which a black worker is killed trying to put out a fire in a steel mill was intended to engender the disgust of Soviet pupils in the exploitation of blacks in the USA and convince them that in a capitalist, and moreover racist, society there is no, and there cannot be, democracy (*Literatūros chrestomatija XI klasei* 1954: 73–84). In this way, Cvirka's satirical novel written in the 1930s about a Lithuanian by the name of Pranas Krukelis (Frank Kruk) who had become rich in the USA was used in Soviet propaganda in an attempt to expose postwar US society, representing the free world as exploitative, racist and inhumane. As a contrast to the USA, pupils were presented with Cvirka's wartime and postwar propaganda short stories celebrating the brotherhood and solidarity of the nations of the USSR.

Between 1950 and 1953, his creative work was supplemented in the upper forms with his non-fiction work. For example, pupils in form 11 were required to learn off by heart (!) a passage chosen by a teacher from *Gruzijos širdis* (The Heart of Georgia, 1947), a publicistic work glorifying Stalin. The ability of pupils to recite this text was even tested during the final oral examination (*Vidurinių mokyklų programos* 1950: 123; *Vidurinių mokyklų brandos atestato egzaminų bilietai 1950/51* 1951: 15; *Vidurinių mokyklų brandos atestato egzaminų bilietai 1951/52* 1952: 13; *Vidurinių mokyklų brandos atestato egzaminų bilietai 1952/53* 1953: 14).

To sum up Cvirka's canonisation in the school system during the Stalinist period, we can state that there was a consistent strengthening of his canonical

position, from being one of a number of Soviet writers in 1940 and 1941 to basically the most important Lithuanian prose writer from 1948 to 1953. His entrenchment in the school canon was undoubtedly influenced by his early death in 1947.

It was not just his creative work that was important to Cvirka's canonisation in schools, but also his exemplary background from a Soviet perspective: a communist writer who through his life and work showed the Lithuanian people the path to be followed, how to fight for communism, and what a new Soviet human being should be (Venclova 1953: 8). It was not the poor quality of his Soviet-era work but his loyalty to the Party that explains why the Soviet regime gave this writer such prominence (he was appointed chairman of the Writers' Union of the Lithuanian SSR [1940–1941 and 1945–1947], his state awards,<sup>12</sup> his posthumous memorialisation<sup>13</sup>), and ensured the dissemination of his writings (a central place in the school and academic canon),<sup>14</sup> and a tenfold increase (compared to the interwar period) in the print runs of his works (*Petras Cvirka gyvenime ir kūryboje* 1953: 158). A large part of the print runs was made up of Russian translations of his work. No other Lithuanian writer was translated so much into the languages of the communist bloc and the USSR (Venclova 1953: 4). After his death, he was accorded not just a state funeral in Vilnius (Žukauskas 1949: 55–60), but also a commemoration in Moscow (Baltušis 1949: 76–79). As can be seen, the canonisation of Cvirka (like Nėris) took place on a scale encompassing the whole USSR, and not just the Lithuania SSR. During the Soviet years, one could achieve a canonical position in Lithuania only if one was recognised in the wider Soviet Union. This was how the centralised cultural and educational policy worked in the totalitarian system.

After Stalin's death, the number of lessons devoted to Cvirka gradually decreased (from 20 lessons in 1955 to 10 lessons in 1987), but that still allowed him to be one of the authors receiving the most attention in schools.

12 For 'services to the people and to literature', Cvirka was awarded the Order of the Badge of Honour and the Order of the Red Banner of Labour (*Knyga apie Petrą Cvirką* 1949: 17).

13 The Cvirka Memorial Museum opened in Kaunas in 1951. A couple of years later, in 1953, another memorial museum opened in the village of Klangiai, where Cvirka spent his childhood. In 1959, a sculpture of Cvirka (by Juozas Mikėnas) was unveiled in Vilnius in a central square to mark the 50th anniversary of his birth. Streets in the larger towns of Lithuania and a steamship were named after him. A school that Cvirka once attended, and even a collective farm in the area where he was born, was named in his honour.

14 An academic edition of Cvirka's works (13 volumes in total) was published in 1949–1957, eight volumes came out in 1959, and seven volumes in 1983–1986.

The reduction in the number of lessons was due to the declining thematic relevance of his work, and at the same time due to increasing competition from younger and more modernist prose writers. At the end of the 1960s, more space began to be given to modernist Lithuanian prose in the school curriculum at the expense of classics of Socialist Realism.

At the end of the Soviet years, less emphasis was given in the curriculum to Cvirka's propagandist, aesthetically inferior postwar short stories. 'Earth the Nourisher' remained his most important novel, and the only compulsory one for pupils to read. We can say in summary that Cvirka continued to hold his position as the first Lithuanian Socialist Realist writer, although at the end of this period, with the decline in the number of lessons devoted to him, his position in the school canon was no longer so marked and dominant.

### **The (de)canonisation of Cvirka and Nėris in the post-Soviet school system**

The problem of the (de)canonisation of Soviet classics in the changing political and cultural situation in Lithuania arose at the end of the 1980s. Educational reform began in 1988 (Bruzgelevičienė 2008: 63–169), the same year that Sąjūdis<sup>15</sup> was founded, before Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1990. In rethinking literary history, Cvirka and Nėris, who were the core of the Soviet canon, were identified as the most problematic writers. There were publications full of discussions in the late 1980s and 1990s as to whether the approach towards these writers was right (Bučys 1994: 16), and that perhaps, on the contrary, they were being undeservedly attacked (Antanaitis 1998: 146). The media repeatedly called Cvirka and Nėris unsuitable for educational purposes in schools (see Daujotytė 1995: 8; Bražėnas 1998: 11). What was most often stressed was the political complexity of the Soviet period, and the assertion that not everything in the Soviet canon was without value (Bukelienė 1990: 3–4), and therefore these writers did not deserve rejection, but rather 'political and cultural tolerance', and new interpretations of their creative output (Auryla 1989: 1–2).

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15 Founded in 1988, Sąjūdis was a political organisation that raised issues of democracy and independence for Lithuania, organised meetings and events, and helped to lay the foundations for the restoration of Lithuania's independence.

Several factors determined these active discussions regarding the place of Soviet literary classics. The new school system was based on the concept of a National School, based on personal self-realisation (creativity and individuality), which had to be linked to what it meant to be a citizen and a member of a community (Narkevičius 1989; Jonynienė 1990). In all five of the adopted Lithuanian language and literature curricula<sup>16</sup> for the upper forms in the period under discussion, two fundamental aspects in the understanding of literature were affirmed: literature as part of the nation's history, and literature as a subject of aesthetics. In the very first curricula in the Sąjūdis period, an attempt was made to restructure the Lithuanian literary canon: the work of writers who had left Lithuania because of the impending Soviet reoccupation, and those who were repressed by the Soviets, were integrated, and many Soviet writers were excluded (*Vidurinės bendrojo lavinimo mokyklos programos* 1989). Although desovietisation had not yet been implemented on a legal basis in Lithuania (the much-discussed law on desovietisation was not adopted [Antanaitis 2008: 89–92]),<sup>17</sup> after the declaration of independence a large part of society strove to get rid of Soviet relics and 'take stock of the past' (Švedas 2013: 332–338). Another significant change was the political and social orientation towards the West (Lithuania joined the European Union and Nato in 2004). That also played a fundamental role in education: Western concepts of education were integrated, while the content of literary education was extensively supplemented with the work of authors from the West.

### Poetry as an act of repentance: Nėris in today's school canon

The work of Nėris was included as compulsory in all Lithuanian language and literature curricula in the post-Soviet period. As a writer, she maintained her central position in early literary education curricula (1989, 1991), while her life and work were presented to pupils in discussing the Stalinist and de-Stalinisation period (1940–1955) (*Vidurinės bendrojo lavinimo mokyklos programos* 1991). Her poetry from both the interwar and wartime periods is included in curricula,

<sup>16</sup> Approved in 1989, 1991, 1994, 2002 and 2011.

<sup>17</sup> The 'Law on the Desovietisation of Public Spaces' was adopted in 2022, and came into force in 2023.

textbooks and books of readings from 1990 to 2000. Only her exclusively socialist work was left out. In the first literature curriculum, fundamentally reformed in accordance with the National School concept, the imperative of Soviet times was rejected: only periods and subjects in literary history are specified, but not a single author is mentioned as compulsory (Lukšienė et al. 1994). However, the works of the most important canonical writers were studied, with Nėris included in the lesson plans for the upper forms. So her central position in the school canon, compared with the late Soviet period, did not change. However, the interpretation of her work, and of the narrative of her life, underwent significant changes.

In 1994 a new previously unpublished collection of Nėris' wartime poetry appeared, edited by the poet herself, with the title *Prie didelio kelio* (By the Great Road) (Nėris 1994). She had begun to prepare this collection in the spring of 1944, but as has already been mentioned, after she fell ill, and when she was on her deathbed, her editors published the book under another title, 'A Nightingale Cannot but Sing', radically changing the structure of the collection, throwing out some of the poems, and heavily revising others (Kvietkauskas 2016: 8–19). After the restoration of independence, the collection was published in a print run of 5,000 copies, which was huge by Lithuanian standards (it was reprinted twice the same year due to the high demand), and had an important impact on changing people's perception of her. Even though all the poems published in the collection had been published in the Soviet years, the restored structure of the collection and the original texts of the poems stimulated a renewed interpretation of the poet's work.

In the poem 'To Maironis' (and some other poems), dedicated to the poet of the Lithuanian national revival, there are hints that Nėris might have regretted going over to the camp of left-wing writers: '*Ar galėčiau iš pusiaukelės sugrįžti, / Ar galėčiau – tais pačiais keliais?*' (Could I have come back from the half-way point, / Could I have come back – along the same roads?) (Nėris 1994: 14). Literary scholars have highlighted the frequent motifs of longing for her homeland, her suffering by losing it, and her guilt and repentance, and stressed her confession of her sins and the desire to atone for them. Although the collection contains work connected with war, the power of the Soviet Union, and poems glorifying war heroes, it is not emphasised in the introduction to the collection, nor in how it was subsequently interpreted.

Motifs of the poet's repentance, reconstructed from her poetry, became the axis around which the narrative of her biography was built in textbooks and readers that came out between 1990 and 2000. A renewed approach to Nėris in the school system was instituted by the textbook *Lietuvių literatūra 11* (Lithuanian Literature 11) (Daujotytė 1994) by Viktorija Daujotytė (b. 1945), one of Lithuania's most influential literary scholars. It is worth noting that Daujotytė was one of the editors of the collection 'By the Great Road', and, among other things, has written as many as three monographs on Nėris' work (Daujotytė 1995; 1999; 2005).

Two procedures are applied in this textbook, which are also applied later in presenting Nėris' life and work. Firstly, Nėris (like Cvirka) is taken back to the period 1900 to 1940, even though throughout the Soviet years and the first years of independence the writer was introduced to pupils as belonging to the literature of the war and the postwar period. This shift of the centre of her poetry to the interwar years is seen in all the textbooks right up to the 2010s. It is worth noting that in the Second Republic of Lithuania the canon was newly formed and all literary education in general was based on looking back at the interwar period: there was a focus on interwar didactics,<sup>18</sup> and, in addition, authors who reached the peak of their creativity during the interwar years make up a significant part of the Lithuanian literary canon. In the case of Nėris, the change in periods makes it possible to put her in textbooks with the main generation of Lithuanian lyric poets of the 1930s, the so-called Neo-romantics, showing her deep roots in the culture of the interwar period and her important role in the literary field of the time. It is also important that her work and life are disassociated from the choices she made during the war years, including her political ones.

Secondly, what is specific both in the textbook under discussion and in other textbooks of the first and second decade is that in relating Nėris' biography, the authors of the textbooks do not mention her membership of Trečias frontas or her left-wing views, or they mentioned only in passing that those views were imposed on her. In presenting the Soviet occupation and the annexation, it is

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18 In 1990 and 1991, works connected with education by the philosophers Antanas Maceina and Juozas Šalkauskis were republished. There were also new editions of interwar textbooks: Motiejus Miškinis' *Lietuvių literatūra* (Lithuanian Literature, 1939), Juozas Ambrazevičius' *Visuotinė literatūra* (Universal Literature, 1934), and a collection of essays prepared in 1925–1940 under the title *Kaip mokyta literatūros* (How Literature Was Taught, 1997).



stressed that the poet did not understand the situation, and naively believed that the life of Lithuanians in the Soviet Union would be better, that allegedly she did not go into politics of her own free will but was pushed into it by other literary figures, and so on (Daujotyte 1994: 193–194; 2003: 427–428; Kanišauskaitė et al. 2004: 278–279). Both Daujotyte and the authors of textbooks published later, in referring to the circumstances of her writing ‘A Poem about Stalin’, speculate that the poem could have been written out of her fear of arrest, and not of her own free will. The subject matter of the verse in the collection ‘By the Great Road’, as the poet’s authentic testament, was used to back up these assertions. Generally speaking, the established approach is that the poet’s verse should be read by directly connecting it with her life, and to see the feelings and thoughts expressed in the verse through the prism of her life, and for this reason the motifs of guilt and repentance prominent in her wartime poetry are applied in evaluating her political activities as a biographical subject. It is worth stressing that Nėris did not renounce her socialist ideals in either her work or in any surviving egodocuments. So the narrative of her being a victim of circumstance, of being a martyr, was basically created through selectively chosen poems from the collection ‘By the Great Road’, and often through individual lines (e.g. ‘*Bet kojos žengt nedrįsta – / Tiek daug, tiek daugel klydę*’ [But my feet dare not take a step – / So many, so many mistakes have I made], from the poem ‘Tolimas sapnas’ [A Distant Dream]) (Nėris 1994: 30).

As can be seen, attempts were made between 1990 and 2010 to establish a new interpretation of Nėris’ life. A new curriculum came into force in 2012 (*Vidurinio ugdymo bendrosios programos* 2011), which establishes an exclusively contextual-biographical model for the teaching of literature. In this curriculum, the image of Nėris as a martyr is strengthened even further. The only compulsory work left for study is the collection ‘By the Great Road’, and in discussing it in textbooks, repentance, sorrow and the longing for one’s homeland are even more clearly emphasised (Daujotyte et al. 2012; Kanišauskaitė et al. 2012). The return of the centre of the author’s work from interwar lyric poetry to the war years (as was the case in the Soviet period) allows for the strengthening of the biographical model of reading her work. A great deal of attention is given to Nėris’ biography: she is portrayed as a victim of circumstance, and the act of repentance through her work is highlighted. We have already discussed how immediately after the restoration of independence the facts of her collaboration

with the Soviet regime were usually glossed over. This change in the extent of attention given to her biography in the 2010s can be explained by the interpretation of the redemption of guilt that was settled on.

The reception in schools of Nėris as the central Lithuanian poet of the 20th century in the Second Lithuanian Republic coincides with her reception in other discourses. All her anniversaries are celebrated, the writer is remembered and honoured.<sup>19</sup> Over the more than 30 years of the Second Lithuanian Republic, various types of her memorialisation, begun during the Soviet years, have been continued: since the restoration of independence, the Salomėja Nėris Literary Prize, established in 1972, has continued to be awarded, schools and streets continue to be named after her (there are 47 streets in Lithuania with her name) (Antanavičius 2018). It would be hard for any other 20th-century Lithuanian writer to compete with her in terms of the profusion of publications of her work.<sup>20</sup> She is also exceptional in the profusion of academic attention she receives.

It can be seen from the textbooks and publications discussed here that Nėris' image in schools changed after 1989. The feminist literary scholar Solveiga Daugirdaitė has written about her 'suitability for representation': over different periods and in different political circumstances, she was acceptable as an important writer to Catholics, to Trečias frontas, and to Soviet ideology. To illustrate the breadth of the spectrum of her reception and the fluidity of interpretations, Daugirdaitė uses the analogy of makeup: 'in her representations, where necessary, either her left or right cheek is rouged; her lips are painted, she is wearing a coquettish shawl, sometimes her makeup is removed, and her brow decorated with worry lines' (Daugirdaitė 1996: 172). In this description, the semantics of makeup is important, pointing first to representation and consciously applied corrections, and not the real content.

Daugirdaitė raises another idea: according to her, Nėris has become a collective figure of Lithuanian culture, and even more than that, one could call her the most famous Lithuanian woman (Daugirdaitė 2005: 241–256). Some researchers, in particular literary scholars of the older generation, bear witness to the significance of Nėris' poetry for their own identity, for example, in stating

<sup>19</sup> Separate issues of teaching journals were devoted to the writer: *Gimtasis žodis*, No 11, 1994, *Gimtasis žodis*, No 11, 2004, etc.

<sup>20</sup> Reprints of about 30 collections and selections of Nėris' poetry, as well as some separate poems by her, have come out since 1990.

that the poet's work, like folklore, 'has penetrated into our consciousness for all time, and become a part of our senses and conception of the world' (Sventickas 2004: 2). For them, the author 'penetrated [their] consciousness', which is also due to the fact that her work was at the centre of the school and the academic literary discourse during the Soviet years. In the Second Lithuanian Republic, just as in the Soviet years, she occupies a leading position in the school literary canon. Although, in an aesthetic sense, during almost all the independence period, Nėris' interwar lyric poetry has been considered to be the centre of her work, the narrative of repentance was reconstructed from the works she wrote during the war years. This part of her work is used to promote the image of her as a victim of historical circumstances, one who in her work expressed repentance for her political 'errors'. From 2012, with the contextual-biographical narrative of the history of literature taking hold in the teaching of literature in schools, there has been a change again to pull back from aesthetics, and emphasise that literature is the narrator of the nation's history. For this reason, Nėris' wartime lyric poetry has come to be considered at the centre of her work as well.

### **'He does not have a nice biography': Cvirka in the post-Soviet school canon**

The dynamics of Cvirka's canonisation in post-Soviet Lithuania can be divided into two stages: when he was and when he was no longer represented in the canon. In early curricula (1989, 1991), like Nėris, Cvirka was presented in the upper forms as a major author in the context of the Stalinist and early de-Stalinisation period. In published literature lesson plans for 1990 to 2000, his novel 'Earth the Nourisher' and his short stories appear in fewer than half of them, as opposed to Nėris, who is mentioned in all of them. The last time that Cvirka's work was put forward to be studied in the upper forms was in 2000. With the curriculum for 2002 (*Lietuvos bendrojo lavinimo mokyklos Bendrosios programos ir išsilavinimo standartai XI–XII klasėms* 2002), Cvirka disappeared from the curricula for the upper forms. There is no discussion of the writer's life and work in any textbook for the upper forms published in the 21st century. Since 2001, he has also been excluded from *matura* examinations (whereas Nėris appears six times in topics in the *matura* examinations from 2001 to 2022). What led to Cvirka's disappearance from schools?

What first becomes apparent is how differently he is represented, compared to Nėris, in school materials between 1900 and 2000. In Daujotyte's textbook discussed above, on one hand, the writer is presented as a unique, original interwar prose writer, 'an author of classics of children's literature'. Daujotyte discusses his work from 1930 to 1940, so the centre of the work, like Nėris' work, is moved into the pre-Soviet period. On the other hand, the presentation of Cvirka's life is different to the presentation of Nėris' life. His biography is not gone into in any detail, and the emphasis is put on how the author suffered poverty in his early years. Cvirka's association with *Trečias frontas*, unlike that of Nėris, is not described as an error, as ideological naivety, but as a natural consequence of his beliefs. The lack of repentance is described as a basic difference in the biographies of these two writers (Daujotyte 1994: 275, 278). In the second revised version of the textbook, the author adds a telling phrase sanctioning the writer's political activities: 'Petras Cvirka does not have a nice biography' (Daujotyte 1996: 429). Cvirka's political actions are described identically without any omissions in other school material from 1990 to 2000 (see Zaborskaitė 1991: 591). So compared to Nėris, Cvirka's political activities are judged much more severely. Juxtaposing his active collaboration with the Soviet regime with the image of Nėris as passive and unable to orientate herself in politics, their contradictory nature becomes clear.

It seems that between 1990 and 2000, literary scholars looked for arguments which would help Cvirka remain in the school literary canon, despite his 'not nice' biography. One of these attempts was to rethink his work and erase the label of pioneer of Socialist Realism that had been 'hung' on him during the Soviet years (Bražėnas 1998: 5–6). On the 90th anniversary of Cvirka's birth in 1999, Petras Bražėnas (b. 1941), his last biographer, stated that he was still hopeful that Cvirka's prose writings would 'enter the next century' (D.K. 1999: 158); but, as we have seen, these hopes were not fulfilled. Both Bražėnas and other researchers first tried to reinterpret the contents of the writer's prose, earlier called socialist, as socially sensitive. 'Motifs of aggravated social injustice' and 'love and compassion for ordinary, hardworking, poor rural people in Lithuania' were aspects mentioned in interpreting his prose (Skeivys 2010: 507, 546). The strategy of reinterpreting was proposed even for texts in which a socialist programme of life is celebrated and Stalin is glorified, as in the short story 'The Deputy' (Martinkus 2001: 84).

However, attempts to reinterpret Cvirka's work have not had any great impact on how the writer has been received. We can assume that there are other reasons for this, apart from his 'not nice' biography. Firstly, the social criticism in his prose is very contextualised. In the novel 'Earth the Nourisher', as has been said, an appeal is made directly to the land reform carried out in the interwar years. To the younger generation, unaware of the historical context, the novel became increasingly less understandable. An attempt was made to reinterpret it by emphasising the archetypal image of the earth mother, the novel's poetic language, and the relations between people (Daujotytė 1996: 420–423). Despite this, the new interpretation did not save it from being excluded from the school canon, and in 1996 extracts from the most important work of the Soviet canon were published in readers for the last time (Zaborskaitė, Norkevičienė 1996: 609–62). What could also have contributed to its decanonisation is the novel's agrarian themes, in which the increasingly urban society in Lithuania is less and less interested.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that attention shifted from Cvirka's novels to his short prose. In the prewar short stories, which encouraged morality and evoked pity for the oppressed, the didactic content was more important than the historical context, and in addition, there were fewer details on agrarian culture in them. Despite this, the focus on short prose did not help Cvirka take a strong position in the reformed canon. It is likely that one of the reasons was the speeded-up processes around 2000 in the publication of literature (national and in translation) for children and young adults (Kišūnaitė 2007: 279–287). The increase in literature relevant to children and young adults in the 21st century pushed Cvirka's prose, steeped as it was in the realities of the first half of the 20th century, away from the centre of attention. We may also recall the above-mentioned 'Westernisation' of Lithuania that began to take place on various levels after the declaration of independence, but which became especially more extensive at the beginning of the 21st century. It is probably no coincidence that Cvirka's writings disappeared from secondary schools at about the time of Lithuania joining the EU (in 2004).

Although the treatment of work relevant to children and young adults, as well as being socially sensitive, did not help Cvirka to retain a strong position in the newly reformed school canon for upper forms, his status as a children's writer is perhaps the only one still relevant in schools to this day. Cvirka's work, like that of Nėris, appears in many post-Soviet curricula for the lower forms

(5 to 10), usually under the theme of social problems (Jackūnas et al. 1997: 119–139; *Lietuvos bendrojo lavinimo mokyklos Bendrosios programos ir išsilavinimo standartai* 2003: 109–310; *Pradinio ir pagrindinio ugdymo bendrosios programos* 2008: 459–788; *Lietuvių kalbos ir literatūros pagrindinio ugdymo bendroji programa* 2016). This situation reflects the idea that in terms of the canon, the selection of authors and their work for upper forms usually provokes the most discussions (Norkevičienė 2004: 9). With Cvirka's work remaining in school curricula only in the lower forms, a shift occurred in his reception, from that of a writer also writing for children, to that of writing only for children (Maskuliūnienė 2011: 137–148; Bražėnas 1995: 252). In discussing him as a children's author, the question is not raised about his political orientation, because in the lower forms there is no need to acquaint pupils with the biographies of writers.

We have argued that Nėris' work satisfied two fundamental principles in reforming the Lithuanian literary canon: canonical works are considered to have an aesthetic value, and they tell the dominant collective story of the nation. In the case of Cvirka, there was insufficient argumentation in the presentation of his work, either as a part of the nation's history or as being of aesthetic value. Although critics frequently emphasised the writer's talent (Bražėnas 1998: 37; Antanaitis 1998: 148), that was not enough for him to retain his position in the canon, probably because his background did not fit the collective narrative of the nation's history. So despite the above-mentioned attempts, he almost imperceptibly disappeared from the centre of the canon.

Cvirka's decanonisation is well attested to by the fact that the anniversary of his birth is celebrated less frequently and not so grandly as Nėris' anniversary. On occasions when it is mentioned in the press, the problematic evaluation of his biography and work is discussed (D.K. 1999: 157). There is basically no mention of any celebrations of Cvirka's anniversary in the main newspapers and magazines for teachers (1999, 2009). The scant attention to his work is also reflected by published works: from 1990, excluding individual somewhat more numerous publications of his short stories for children, only a few reprints of his prose work have appeared (Cvirka 1996; 2006; 2009; Iešmantaitė 2007). Two monographs devoted to him were published in the period from 1990 to 2000 (Skeivys 1996; Bražėnas 1998).

Since 1990, Cvirka's name has been removed from some schools and streets (although there is still a good number of streets named after him in

various places in Lithuania [Antanavičius 2018]), and the name of the Cvirka Literary Prize has also been changed (in 2017). The most discussed event was the removal of the monument to Cvirka (unveiled in 1959) that used to stand in a central square in Vilnius. In 2019, the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre presented their conclusions to the effect that Cvirka had actively collaborated with the Soviet government. Guided by this document, the Vilnius municipality took the decision to remove the monument. This generated especially lively discussions among literary scholars, art historians, historians and politicians. Despite all the arguments against the removal of the monument, including his talent as a writer and the monument testifying to Lithuania's history being open to more than one interpretation, the monument was removed in 2021. In thinking about the reception of Cvirka's work in the post-Soviet school system, this history is important for two reasons. Firstly, as in the case of the school canon, biography clearly outweighs any arguments of literary history or aesthetic value. Secondly, although these processes occurred at different times, Cvirka has begun to disappear slowly from both the school canon and the cityscape.

## Conclusions

In Soviet Lithuania (and also in Soviet Russia itself [Malygin 2012, 420–421]) a lot of time had to pass for the new school literary canon to 'settle'. Until about 1950, we see a changing chronology in the literary process, a change in the lists of writers and their writings, and in the number of lessons devoted to them. Correspondingly, the place of Cvirka and Nėris in the Soviet Lithuanian school system changed from being mentioned in the list of 'progressive' writers to the position of classics. In the 1950s, both were already named as the most prominent Lithuanian writers of the 20th century, and, accordingly, the largest number of lessons was devoted to the study of their lives and their writings in the final year of secondary school.

They held on to this position throughout the Soviet years. In Nėris' reception in the post-Stalinist period, an ambivalence began to appear between her being regarded as a poet of the heroic struggle, and a gentle, sensitive lyric poet. In fact, more attention in schools began to be paid to the lyrical, neo-

romantic side of her work. The evaluation of Cvirka's work did not change in any significant way in the post-Stalinist period. But because of their clear social engagement, his writings became less relevant with the changing times, and for this reason their importance in the late Soviet years waned to some degree, but they still retained an important position in the school canon.

Nėris remained at the centre of the school canon after the collapse of the Soviet system. In reconsidering the system of literary values, her central position in the school canon was legitimised for several reasons. Between 1900 and 2000, the centre of her work shifted to the interwar period, with the aesthetic value of her poetry being highlighted. Her works with socialist content and praising the Soviet regime were rejected, and the collection 'By the Great Road', published for the first time in 1994, allowed for a reinterpretation of her life. Although the poet's biography in textbooks and readers after the collapse of the Soviet system was more or less glossed over, in a biographical reading of her poetry, the frequent semantics of guilt and redemption eventually consolidated her image as a martyr. In this way, the author became the subject of her lyric poetry, and her biography merged with her work. Academics who had studied her work extensively and prepared it for publication contributed significantly to the school canonisation of Nėris as one of the most important Lithuanian writers of the 20th century.

Cvirka still appeared in literature curricula, in textbooks and readers between 1990 and 2000. The writer's position in the school canon of that time can be explained by an inertia characteristic of schools: there were no lists of compulsory authors or works, but some teachers did nevertheless choose to teach Cvirka's work. However, he has not been included in curricula since 2002. On one hand, this is due to the social criticism in his prose having lost its relevance in the new political system, and, besides, the agrarian culture that is important in his works is less and less comprehensible to urban society. On the other hand, it is most likely that Cvirka disappeared from literary education in the upper forms because his biography does not conform to the collective narrative of the nation's history. Both in his political views and in his artistic programme, Cvirka was consistently left-wing. It is not possible to distinguish between several opposing poles in either his biographical narrative or in his work, as opposed to Nėris, nor is it possible to 'de-sovietise' him. In juxtaposing the 'penitent' Nėris and the collaborator Cvirka, the latter's lack of repentance



becomes even more apparent. According to Andrea Lanoux, a biographical approach is very effective in the attempt to establish a national literary canon, when a lot of attention is given not just to creative work but also to the narratives of writers' lives, which can be identified with the dominant collective history of a nation (Lanoux 2001: 624–626). This is also shown by the (de)canonisation of Soviet classics in today's school system. What helped Nėris' work to remain in the canon was the reinterpretation of her biographical narrative. Cvirka's biography, in contrast, eliminated the canonical value of his creative work.

*Translated by Romas Kinka*

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