

MIRA MILADINOVIĆ ZALAZNIK – DEAN KOMEL
(Eds. | Hrsg.)

EUROPE AT THE CROSSROADS OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD
100 Years after the Great War

EUROPA AN DEN SCHEIDEWEGEN DER GEGENWÄRTIGEN WELT
100 Jahre nach dem Großen Krieg



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Europe at the Crossroads of Contemporary World
Europa an den Scheidewegen der gegenwärtigen Welt

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TATIANA SHCHYTTSOVA

Emotional Legitimacy of National Consciousness and Literary Imagination (in the Belarusian Context)

Abstract: The paper thematizes literature as one of the basic cultural forms that can fulfill emotional legitimation of national consciousness. Drawing on examples of literary works by Belarusian authors, the paper shows different forms of such legitimation as well as how they are conditioned by their respective socio-political and cultural contexts.

Keywords: national belongingness, emotional legitimacy, literary imagination, Ignat Abdziralovich, Anatol' Sys

Belarus is probably the only nation-state in Europe which has two rivaling (ideologically contradictory) modern foundation myths: the first one is connected with the declaration of the Belarusian People's Republic in March 1918 (i.e., almost three weeks after the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk); the second one, with the declaration of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia in January 1919.¹ The distance of one year implies an irreducible discrepancy between two scopes of social imaginary mobilized and developed in connection with the respective political events. This paper seeks to address the affective dimension of this discrepancy.

1 Belarus became a part of the USSR in 1922, under the name of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Cf. Per Anders Rudling, "The Beginnings of Modern Belarus: Identity, Nation, and Politics in a European Borderland", *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7, no.3 (2015): 115–27.

In order to formulate the task of the paper, I will begin by defining the key terms contained in the title—in what sense they are used, and what they are referring to. I borrow the notion of emotional legitimacy of national consciousness from Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities*. He writes in the introduction:

My point of departure is that nationality—or as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.²

Anderson does not define this concept specifically; its meaning is revealed contextually: at the core of national consciousness (i.e., of such cultural artefacts as nationality, nationalism) lies a feeling of the profound attachment. It is the actual (or actualized) experience of this feeling that constitutes the emotional legitimacy of all the relevant notions (nationality, national belongingness, etc.). I also attach importance to the focus of Anderson's analysis on the historical genesis of the ideas about nation and nationality. In this paper, I am going to concentrate on the emotional dimension of the historical process explored by Anderson. Accordingly, my initial thesis could be formulated as follows: the alterations in the content of national consciousness include corresponding historical changes in the character (i.e., in modes and modulations) of emotional attunement to national belongingness. In this regard, the paper unfolds at the intersection of such disciplinary trajectories as theory of nation-building and cultural history of emotions. Therefore, in the first approximation the thematic field of the paper could be defined as a cultural history of emotional legitimation of national consciousness.

The given definition, however, is not yet sufficient until the second notion—literary imagination—is introduced. I will address lit-

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), 4.

erature as one of the basic cultural forms that fulfills and articulates emotional legitimation of national consciousness. I proceed from the assumption that literature can create images (metaphors and imaginative worlds) which embody—and thereby express—the affective dispositions defining an emotional tone of national consciousness in the respective historical period. For the purposes of my paper it is important to adhere to the approach developed by Anderson, according to which an understanding of nation and national belongingness are initially articulated not in terms of ideology or political program, but instead in terms of cultural artefacts. As Anderson emphasizes, the latter are essentially closer to “kinship” and “religion” than to “liberalism” or “fascism.” In other words (to use a phenomenological terminology), Anderson’s approach allows looking at the genesis of the idea of nation and at the feeling of national belongingness from the point of view of a *life-world*, or, to be more specific, from the point of view of an individual’s belonging to a life-world, i.e., to a particular cultural-historical community. Correspondingly, the different ways in which an individual experiences a connection with the nation (a connection which by definition is both meaningful and affective) can be considered as specific cultural-historical forms of life.

Literature, as already noted, has the capacity to imaginatively (metaphorically, etc.) conceptualize such experience. The uniqueness of its way of conceptualization is, in my opinion, that the literary image can fulfill—articulate and transmit—the very emotional legitimation of national consciousness. It follows that reading literature—together with the narrative and through it—is also a “reading of moods” (to use an expression of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht).³ However, unlike Gumbrecht, I will be looking not at the (possible) discrepancy between the affective and meaning dimensions of literary work,⁴ but at the essential connection between them, since such a connection is

3 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen lesen: Über eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2011).

4 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

inherent to the very feeling (to the very sense) of national belongingness. I will investigate how this connection has been articulated in literature in different historical periods. In so doing, I am going to reveal how this or that concrete type of emotional legitimation of national consciousness is conditioned by its respective socio-political and cultural context. To this end, I have chosen two works relating to different—almost polar—periods in the modern history of Belarus. They are the essay *Going the Primordial Way: Studies of the Belarusian Worldview* by Ignat Abdziralovich⁵ (published in 1921), and the poetry collection *Pan Forest* by Anatol' Sys⁶ (published in 1989). The former was published two years after the creation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (which appeared as a form of political “appropriation” of the Belarusian People’s Republic declared previously by the leaders of Belarusian national movement). The latter appeared two years before the fall of the Soviet Union and the foundation of the Republic of Belarus as an independent European state.

A few words as to why these particular works have been chosen. There are three main reasons. The first one concerns the mode of emotional legitimation. Generally speaking, there are two basic modes of emotional legitimation of national consciousness: deficient and affirmative. The former develops around the ideas/experience of deficiency and underdevelopment (maltreatment and oppression) of the people, considered as being unable to acquire national sovereignty and dignity. The latter, on the contrary, is characterized by a positive affirmation of the possibility and/or the actuality of the nation’s sovereign existence and creativity. The aforementioned literary works, despite their polar historical localization, have in common an affirmative mode of emotional legitimation of national consciousness, although they embody their affirmative affective disposition in

5 Ignat Abdziralovich, *Advechnym shliakham: Das' ledziny belarusskaga s' vetagliadu* [*Going the Primordial Way: Studies of the Belarusian Worldview*] (1921), https://knihi.com/lhnat_Kanceuski/Adviecnym_slacham.html (accessed December 15, 2019).

6 Anatol' Sys, *Pan Les* [*Pan Forest*] (Minsk: Mastatskaia Litaratura, 1989).

very different ways—by different metaphorical, conceptual, and artistic means.

The second reason concerns the clear counter-factual implication of literary imagination in both cases. In both works, the emotional legitimation of national consciousness is performed—by the respective artistic and intellectual means—counter to the prevailing (popular, ideological) positions regarding the perspectives and the very sense of the national renaissance in Belarus. That is to say, literary imagination, in each of the examples at issue, carries out a counter-factual or critical work in unfolding an alternative perspective and cultivating an alternative possibility. Thus, we find in these texts an affirmative pathos underpinned by a strong critical attitude to how “the national question” is pursued and solved in the corresponding periods. It follows, furthermore, that these texts are to be viewed from the angle of cultural politics of emotions, namely, from the point of view of the question: what national feeling/sense is brought to life by the corresponding literary examples of the affirmative emotional legitimation of national consciousness (i.e., consciousness of/about the national subjecthood).

And, finally, the third reason is that the images and imaginary worlds created in the works under consideration have an impressive cognitive (philosophical, mythical) core. Exploring Belarusian culture for the sake of the renaissance of Belarusian nation, Abdziralovich and Sys managed to comprehend their own belonging to the nation in a way which led to the revelation of an objective (essential) meaning of the experience under consideration.

Thus, in what follows, I will consider two literary examples (an essay and a poem) in succession. My goal is to provide an analytical description of the corresponding images and imaginary worlds, and to clarify the way in which they perform an emotional legitimation of national consciousness. Furthermore, the above-mentioned counter-factual implication of literary imagination must be taken into account as well, because such a critical attitude (that, as we will see below, appears in the form of disagreement in Abdziralovich and in the

form of radical rejection in Sys) is a constitutive moment in the genesis of the respective affirmative pathos. Therefore, the presentation of each literary case begins with a brief clarification of the relevant social and historical background against which the literary work fulfills its alternative emotional legitimation of national consciousness.

Ignat Abdziralovich: The Flowing Form

The essay *Going the Primordial Way: Studies of the Belarusian Worldview* by Ignat Abdziralovich⁷ was published in Vilnius in 1921, followed by a lasting “arrest”—spanning the entire Soviet period—in special depositories. The socio-political context behind this essay was determined by the pursuit of national independence by Belarusian intellectuals and activists. As a result of their efforts, the Belarusian People’s Republic was declared an independent state in 1918 in Minsk. However, at that date—because of the consequences of the First World War, on the one hand, and political suppression by the Russian Bolsheviks, on the other—it was impossible to defend the sovereignty of the newly created nation-state. With the Bolsheviks coming to power, instead of the Belarusian People’s Republic, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia was founded in 1919. In the essay, the October Revolution is seen as solely “Russian,” the politics of the Bolsheviks is criticized, and the Belarusian national project is interpreted as being autonomous. The difficulties in upholding this wishful independence are linked by Abdziralovich to the problematic geopolitical situation of Belarus, namely to its standing between two civilizations, between the West and the East, more specifically, between Russia and Poland (each of which politically impeded the

7 Ignat Abdziralovich (Kancheuski) (1896–1923) was a Belarusian thinker, poet, and essayist. Born in Vilnius, he studied in Petersburg and Moscow, and after his military service worked in various cooperative organizations in Smolensk and Vilnius.

development of the Belarusian culture and nation). Because of the long-lasting two-sided political and cultural suppression, the intellectual and cultural context in which the essay appeared, was characterized by the prevalence of an attitude defined by Sergei Dubavets as the “tradition of literary and philosophical mourning for the impoverished homeland.”⁸ In his foreword to the modern edition of Abdziralovich’s essay, Dubavets highlights: “Perhaps, this is the first Belarusian book that is already OVER THERE—over there, where the tradition of literary and philosophical mourning for the lost language, will and fate, for the lost Fatherland, is bound to change for an affirmative idea of creating a new Belarus.”⁹

Now, let us turn to the conceptual image, which is a central element of the new affirmative vision developed by Abdziralovich and, correspondingly, a principal “imaginative” embodiment of his affirmative pathos as such. Abdziralovich calls it a flowing form. Drawing on Henri Bergson’s philosophy of life (as it was presented in Bergson’s famous work *Creative Evolution*, published in 1907), the Belarusian author applies and develops the ideas of the French philosopher in the context of his exploring the Belarusians’ ways of cultural self-manifestation and national self-determination. The point of departure of his meditations is the vision, generally accepted at that time, of the Belarusian culture as something vague and inarticulate. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned border position of Belarus “between the two civilizations,” he does not deny that the state of uncertainty—that of an unidentified subjecthood—is a constitutive characteristic of the life form that lies in this “between”: to be “in-between” (to oscillate) means for the Belarusian culture to historically reproduce indefiniteness (uncertainty).¹⁰ However, at this point

8 Siargej Dubavets, “Pradmova” [Foreword], in: Ignat Abdziralovich, *Advechnym shliakham* (my translation).

9 Dubavets, “Pradmova” (my translation).

10 There is a very remarkable example of articulation of the “indefinite identity” in the cultural history of Belarusians. It is the phenomenon of *tuteishaść* (тутэйшасць). The word *tuteishyia* (тутэйшыя) literally means “coming from

of the analysis, Abdziralovich, inspired by the Bergsonian phenomenology of life, makes a kind of *salto vitale*: he unfolds a perspective that differs from the traditional negative assessment of the cultural and political “indefiniteness” of the Belarusians. The corresponding watershed is programmatically outlined already at the very beginning of his essay:

In the inarticulateness of Belarusian culture one wants to see a spiritual death of the people, their inability to determine their own ideal. Formally, we must agree that we do not have a defined culture, that we have a vague historical path, but this cannot be seen as the spiritual poverty of our people, its inability to independently pursue the creation of their own life forms.¹¹

An alternative interpretation of “indefiniteness” becomes possible as a result of Abdziralovich’s phenomenological “bracketing” of the habitual understanding of “indefiniteness” as a stable negative condition. Let us stress here that this traditional understanding is based on the classical modern idea of subjecthood (of a being-a-subject). In view of Belarus’s geopolitical and geocultural situation as a spatial interregnum (a location “in-between”), Abdziralovich shows that the dramatic socio-historical experience of the Belarusians—as the experience of recurring in-definiteness (hyphenated as an indication of process) due to recurring political and cultural violence from the eastern and western neighbors—allows revealing the in-definite (transitive) state as a paradigmatic one for the living as such (be it an individual or a community). This kind of revelation can be called the heuristics of the borderland, and the “flowing form” is the very essence of what is revealed there. The philosophical meaning of this conceptual image is that in such a way a fundamentally new (non-classical) form of subjecthood is thematized. At issue is being-a-subject

here.” It was used by many Belarusians for the purpose of self-identification, that is, self-determination via simply relating oneself to a local “here.” Cf. Alexander Pershai, “Localness and Mobility in Belarusian Nationalism: The Tactic of Tuteishaść”, *Nationalities Papers* 36, no. 1 (March 2008): 85–103.

11 Ignat Abdziralovich, *Advechnym shliakham* (my translation).

conceived as a *becoming-a-subject*, as a continuing in-definiteness or *subject-in-transition* respectively.

It must become clear now that it would be wrong to interpret the oscillation “in-between” in terms of vacillation. Such interpretation would be just a more or less implicit form of symbolic abuse since it would imply that the call for self-determination should be “satisfied” by subjecting Belarusian culture to one of the empowered forms of culture. Contrary to this approach, Abdziralovich claims that the national self-determination of Belarusians should not rely on the choice between the western and eastern forms of social life as a guiding principle, but instead it should be based on the creation of their own life forms. His conceptual innovation here is that this “own path” is thought of not in terms of ideological constructions of any sort (about the national mission, national idea, etc.), but is revealed due to a kind of essential intuition (*Wesensschau*) regarding the manifestation of life itself, more precisely the cultural-historical life of the particular people to whom the author feels himself belonging.¹²

Thus, the intermediate position of Belarus between two powerful political actors determines not only the tragic historical destiny of the Belarusian people, but also turns out to be an empirical ground for revealing a different form of subjecthood in general—the essence of which is articulated by Abdziralovich in the conceptual image of the flowing form:¹³

12 Abdziralovich stresses in this regard that the task of creating our own, Belarusian, forms of life has to rely on the following imperative: “Let us not create violence and suffering either for others or for themselves—there should be no Belarusian messianism.” Ignat Abdziralovich, *Advechnym shliakham* (my translation). This correlates very well with Balibar’s distinction between nationalisms of liberation and nationalisms of domination. Cf. Etienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism”, in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London/New York: Verso 1991), 37–68.

13 A more detailed and extensive analysis of the essay by Abdziralovich can be found in: Tatiana Shchyttsova, “‘The Attitude of Modernity’ of Ignat Abdziralovich: The Belarusian Borderland as an Exemplary Ground for Philosophical Universalization,” in *Grenzen im Denken Europas: Mittel- und osteuropäische*

We need to remember that life is flowing, that the human soul is not static, that a person should build her life as it develops and flows. [...] In the adaptation of the life forms to this variability, fluidity, in the search for life forms which are elastic, flowing, changeable—lies the meaning of the future, the content of both the individual ideal and the social one.¹⁴

*Anatol' Sys:*¹⁵ *Pan Forest*

Pan Forest is the title of the poetry collection and at the same time the central image that carries out a new emotional (affirmative) legitimation of the national consciousness—counter to the Soviet national policy. Sixty-eight years of Soviet rule in Belarus separate the essay of Abdziralovich and the poetry collection of Sys. The latter emerged in a distinct socio-political and cultural context. After the Belarusian territories became a part of the Soviet Union, two opposite tendencies began to develop in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR): on the one hand, intensive (forcible) Russification and Sovietization of the Belarusian society took place (including physical destruction of the representatives of the national cultural elite during the Stalin period). On the other hand, the very existence of the BSSR enshrined the existence of Belarusian ethnicity at the state level and hence provided a basis for the self-identification of the citizens as incorporated by the nation-state.

Such an ambiguous state of affairs was nothing but a ruse, since national republics turned out to be effective political and administrative means “in the matter of eliminating [...] the national.”¹⁶ The character

Ansichten, ed. Madalena Diaconu and Bianca Boteva-Richter (New Academic Press, 2017), 225–40.

14 Ignat Abdziralovich, *Advechnym shliakham* (my translation).

15 Anatol' Sys (1959–2005) was a Belarusian poet. Born in the Belarusian village Garoshkava, he studied at the Gomel State University, and lived and worked in Minsk from 1985.

16 Valiantsin Akudovich, *Kod adsutnastsi: Asnovy belaruskai mental'nastsi* [*The Code of Absence: The Grounds of Belarusian Mentality*] (Minsk: Logvinov

of this eradication of the national aligned with the maintenance of its formal existence (a sort of Soviet *Aufhebung*) is acutely captured in the following two descriptions: 1) one of the most significant contemporary Belarusian thinkers, Valiantsin Akudovich, highlights that “the national republics were turned into peculiar ghettos, where localized and self-enclosed nations should have been eventually nipped in the bud”;¹⁷ 2) the famous Polish poet Czesław Miłosz predicted a moment when: “[...] the principle of ‘culture, national in form, socialist in content’ will at best mean a monolithic unity of culture regulated from the Center, with preservation in each country a local ornament in the form of folklore.”¹⁸ Stalin’s principle as stated by Miłosz defined the Soviet cultural politics for Soviet internationalism. The work of Sys came at a time when the devastating consequences of this politics for Belarusian national culture were evident. Meanwhile, the recognition of the Soviet regime as detrimental to the nation’s formation presupposed certain emotional dispositions. The affective resistance to the “Soviet” on the part of the “national” was a logically unavoidable implication of the Soviet regime, since it was a political structure which reduced nation to folklore, whilst the idea of “nation-building” was sublated (*aufgehoben*) into the multinational scenery of Soviet festivities. Such a daunting context implies that the affirmative character of the poetic imagery of Sys could not be direct, “naive.” Similarly, it was not utopian—in the sense of an imaginative portrayal of a “bright future” for the Belarusian nation. At the same time, though appearing as a radical refutation of the Soviet sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the national, his writings were not anti-Soviet in the strict (narrow) political sense (that is, not an outspoken political critique of the regime or the Soviet ideology).

Pan Forest yielded a dimension of a different kind and achieved an effect of a different sort. It was a mythologeme that hacked the

Publishing House, 2007), 64 (my translation).

17 Ibid. (my translation).

18 Czesław Miłosz, *Poraboshchennyi razum [The Captive Mind]* (Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteia, 2003), 68. (my translation from Russian).

mental ghetto of Soviet (inter)nationalism. The liberating effect was achieved not by means of intellectual enlightenment, but as a result of the full-scale use of the chthonic and cosmological elements of the Belarusian culture. Thematically (plot-wise), the collection is very diverse (it draws from folk legends, peasant life, cultural figures of Belarus, the persona of the poet, human destinies, and, of course, the fate of the motherland—this being the roughest outline of the topics), and yet all the works have a common atmosphere of an elemental force being released. At the level of characters and images (metaphors and allegories, ordinary people and cultural heroes), the perceptual “reading” of this force succeeds largely due to the intertwining of the human and the nonhuman (animal, vegetal, elemental). Throughout the entire collection, this intertwining is shown as a dimension of human/cultural life, so that while reading one gets a sense that the elemental force manifested in/through such mythological-cosmological intertwining is an irreducible foundation of the very feeling of “being at home,” i.e., being a natural part of one’s motherland. Meanwhile, the literary imagination and poetics of Sys reside at a completely different level than the ideology of “blood and soil.” The event awaiting readers in his poetical world was a chthonic transgression that transformed the reader’s state of mind by bringing back the vivid impulse into the existing context of national culture, that is, into the reader’s life-world.

The gravitational center of this feeling—and at the same time, the semantic and affective center of the entire collection—was the poem “Pan Forest,” which not accidentally gave the title to the entire collection. The verse begins with the line “The Forest is a Temple.” As a sacral dimension, the forest is endowed with the ability to save. The verse is written as an invitation—a call—to get involved with the Sacred. The rite that Pan Forest can perform upon the human is described as follows:

[...]
 ён спыніць жывіцай кроў –
 такога не змогуць людзі,

і, быццам прадвесні гром,
у Вас *немаўля* прабудзіць.

Жыццё і, тым болей, смерць
загубяць свой сэнс цялесны –
Пан Лес не дазволіць мець
пачуццяў, што шкодзяць лесу.

[It'll stop your bleeding with turpentine—
a deed impossible for humans,
and, like a thunder on the eve of spring,
will a speechless infant in you awaken.

Life and, all the more, death
will loose their corporal meaning—
Pan Forest will not tolerate
the feelings that cause the forest harm.^{19]}

The shaking (earthquake-like) effect as well as the transformative power exerted by the poetry of Sys were both existential and political: the released elemental force tore apart the decorative shell of “national form” in the culture of Soviet Belarus and allowed readers to affectively experience an engagement with the autochthonous poetics of Belarusian culture.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a few methodological remarks. On the basis of the examples considered, we can say that literature is a valuable material for phenomenological investigation of national consciousness and, in particular, of the feeling of national belongingness. Thanks to its inherent imaginative power and expressive means, literature is able to reveal an affective core of adherence to national self-identification, to a concrete national culture. In the literary works

19 Sys, *Pan Les*, 56 (my translation).

considered in this paper, the emotional legitimation of national consciousness is a part of literary accomplishment that fairly deserves the name of critical phenomenology.²⁰ For, as shown, the corresponding (affirmative) images (the flowing form, Pan Forest) were born out of the critical discrepancy between the authors' treatment of the national question and the actual state of affairs in society. This critical rootedness in facticity makes the corresponding phenomenological work of the literary imagination "effective-historical," which means: not only conditioned by the pre-given context, but also containing an intention to change it. The outlined critical rootedness means that the genesis of the new affirmative pathos originates in negative affects—of indignation, resentment, anger, etc. (generally speaking, affects of non-acceptance)—which in turn were to be preceded by a relatively long period of enduring suffering due to the position that would then be rejected as unacceptable. The historical meanings (narratives) of the national consciousness are, thus, inseparable from the "living historicity" of the corresponding affective dispositions. As already mentioned, literature is seen as an exceptional medium for the articulation and actualization of this kind of emotional legitimation of national consciousness. It must be emphasized that literature does not represent the corresponding affective dimension, but itself generates the latter. It follows that the emotional legitimation of national consciousness is a performative act of literature—an act which is not only critical regarding its cultural context, but also creative and inspiring in a way that can support both the feeling of national belongingness and that of national originality without any ideological indoctrination and beyond the very possibility of a xenophobic nationalistic attitude.

20 Using this definition, I primarily rely on Husserl's famous letter to Hofmannsthal in which the founder of phenomenological philosophy writes about the similarity between phenomenology and art. He sees similarity in that both the former and the latter perform (achieve) a particular kind of essential intuition. The letter is published in: Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana Dokumente: Briefwechsel*, vol. 7, *Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*, ed. Karl von Schuhmann and Elisabeth Schuhmann (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 133–6.

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