

*History of Literature by Voldemārs Dambergs.
“The Twentieth Century in Latvian Literature”
in the Context of Latvian Literary History
Publications*

Processes of the formation of Latvian national literature occurred rather late as compared to other parts of Europe, and this accounts for the fact that the necessity of defining the processes of literary history arose comparatively late as well. The first reflection titled as a history of Latvian literature is *Mēģinājums latviešu literatūras vēsturē* (An Attempt at the History of Latvian Literature) by the author of German origin, Ernsts Cimmermanis, published in 1812. The content of this book only partially matches the intention of defining the history of Latvian literature that has been indicated in the title of the book. It extends the notion of literature to sermons and sacred speeches by German priests and similar written texts that have been produced in the 16th–19th centuries. The first attempt at writing the history of Latvian literature by an author of Latvian origin occurred in *Latviešu rakstniecība* (Latvian Literature) published in 1860 and three works published in 1893 that may be defined as reviews of the history of Latvian literature. These issues do not provide an exhaustive review of Latvian literature, as at that time Latvian literature was still at its very early stage. Neredzīgais Indriķis (the Blind Indriķis, 1783–1828) was the first poet of Latvian nationality and Ansis Leitāns (1815–1874) was the first prose writer. The time of the birth of autonomous Latvian literature is associated with the 1850–60s and the movement of ‘Young Latvians’ that gave rise to the national identity awareness. Latvian national epic *Lāčplēsis* (Bearslayer) was written by Andrejs Pumpurs in 1888. The very end of the 19th century may be considered the time when mature

respectable works of national Romanticism and realism appeared along with the first samples of autonomous Latvian literature. Thus, the tendency of defining the historiography of Latvian literature processes gains an objective ground and systemic character just in the early 20th century. That was the time when Latvian literature had accumulated a certain experience and drawn closer to the rhythm of European literary processes.

The turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was a period of diverse literary expression with the prevalence of realist and naturalist tradition that was affected by significant European literary figures, e.g. Ibsen, Tolstoy, Zola. At the same time, the romanticist tradition including the national romanticist one initiated in the 1880s continued. In the late 19th–early 20th century, the publication of translations of the world literature into Latvian was greatly extended. A significant part of these translations is constituted by authors and works of Modernist stance, e.g. F. Nietzsche, Russian Symbolists, S. Pszybyshevsky, K. Hamsun, M. Maeterlinck, O. Wilde, etc. Due to the impact of the process of adaptation of foreign literary samples, it is hard to speak of a single dominant trend in the texts by Latvian writers; rather there was a ‘co-existence’ of literary trends. This kind of synthesis in the early 20th century Latvian literature is observed in the form of overlapping of the poetics of diverse trends in one author’s writing as well as coexistence of literary types in Latvian literature on the whole; this may be accounted for by the fact that the literary trends that had replaced one another in the European culture space at the end of the 19th century entered Latvia almost simultaneously. The synthesis of literary trends created the early form of ‘Modernism’ characterized by the existence of individual modernist features instead of a complex scope of modernist aesthetics. It is marked by nuanced challenges of content and form. Modernism developed along with other literary trends.

The major criteria of the modernist expression of the early 20th century are subjectivity, individualization, and search for untraditional poetics. Against the common background of Latvian literature, modernists’ searching was the most radical and poetically expressive one. Modernist writers completely changed the traditional world model and desacralized the former values. Expressive images, indi-

vidualism, subjectivity, outsiderism, sensuality, emotionality, more profound aesthetic and aestheticist studies became the most distinct features of the early modernist style.

World War I almost brought to a standstill the rhythm of culture life. Yet the foundation of independent Latvian state in 1918 gave rise to differing politico-cultural tendencies and changed the content of aesthetic search in literature. Awareness of the national space and construction of identity inspired literary historians to take up describing and classifying the preceding literary processes with a new zeal.

The issues of literary history published up to the present bring out diverse ways of producing the history of literature:

- History of national literature that is produced in a close relation to the history of national identity development.
- Chronological history of literature that is based on a systematic diachronic perspective on the literary process.
- History of literary genres and forms that treats aesthetic and poetic issues in the processes of literary evolution.

In the *interbellum* period in Latvia there were many publications of literary history compiled by different authors (some of them were also significant Latvian writers). They were basically produced according to the first two principles – as the national and/or chronological history of literature. Hence, the reviewers of these publications first of all discerned and criticized the shortcomings of periodization or their chronological aspect, as the compilers and authors of the literary histories considered their main task to produce a chronological description of Latvian literary processes, the analysis of literary phenomena in the context of history, integration of social processes in literature, reviews of individual authors' writing and analysis of their major works. Hence, literary historian Teodors Zeiferts in the foreword to his *Latviešu rakstniecības vēsture* (History of Latvian Writing) (1922) points out his conceptual standpoint aimed at actualizing sources of Latvian literature, e.g. folklore and the role of Baltic German literature in the development of Latvian writing, paying major attention to the literary processes of the recent past:

... Preparing the history of writing for publication we had to acknowledge that it is impossible to provide a completely finished volume as concerns either its material or explication. Day after day new studies of literature appear inciting the issues to be solved in the future. The volume of the material and its explication needs to be limited also to avoid difficulties in publishing and using the book. First of all we focused on the living Latvian writing, both the old and the new one. For this reason the old writing was attributed rather scarce limits by means of literary historical facts briefly denoting its relations with the world literature and efforts for the sake of Latvians. (Zeiferts 1993: 6).

A secondary role in the *interbellum* literary histories has been attributed to the aesthetic aspects of the literary process – the coexistence or change of literary trends, their recurrent manifestations, national specificity, typology, e.g. the peculiarities of the formation and development of realism or Modernism in Latvian literature. Teodors Zeiferts with his book (*Awakening of our National Poetry*) (1893) made the first attempt at providing a review of the literary process concerning the genre of lyric.

A particular theoretical perspective has been selected by the writer Voldemārs Dambergs for his publication of the literary history *20. gadusimtenis latviešu rakstniecībā* (*The Twentieth Century in Latvian Literature*) (1932). The author focuses on the manifold and nuanced processes of the early 20th century Latvian literature. Dambergs has produced reviews on individual writers' work characterizing them in the context of philosophical and aesthetic processes instead of marking the historical or social aspects in the analysis of literary process.

Voldemārs Dambergs (1886–1960) was one of the founders of early Latvian Modernism in Latvian literature; he was carried away by Impressionist experiments and search for original poetics. Therefore he focuses his strategy of the literary history in “The Twentieth Century in Latvian Literature” on the characteristics of the aesthetic principles that he had used himself in his own fiction. He analyzes twentieth-century literary processes through the prism of Modernist features. The thematically focused literary history by Dambergs foregrounds different writers and literary events as compared to those of

many other literary histories of the *interbellum* period. If we are looking for the reason why there was no wider tradition of such focused literary history publications, the answer lies in the culture ideology of the epoch. Hence, J. A. Jansons points out in his publication *Latviešu literatūrvēsturnieka uzdevumi* (Tasks of Latvian Literary Historian) (1936) that each writer has a national spirit. Further and more important task of investigating monographic literary history works is to realize how in the writer's ideology the strivings of Latvian spirit are synthesized with generally human values. This kind of studies are necessary for Latvian literary history. The task of literary historians is to write a national Latvian literary history. J. A. Jansons' appeal clearly expresses the idea of the necessity of a nationally oriented Latvian literary history and marginality of other approaches.

Dambergs' literary history does not make use of synthesizing the literary historical material in the ideological discourse; instead it regards the literary process in its form and content, personalities who break old traditions (Dambergs 1932: 3). The starting point of Damberg's book is motivating the chronological landmark mentioned in its title, "the transition epoch the early twentieth century holds dissatisfaction with the existing, longing and striving for the new, for the worlds hidden in the mist of distance, inner unrest, many dreams and instigations" (ib.; here and in the following my translation – M.B.)

Analyzing the writing of Latvian writers that is close to Modernist poetics, Damberg's each time points to their relation with the Western European tradition of the humanities and its resonance in Latvian writers' works. Hence, as concerns the writer Jānis Poruks (1871–1911), it is mentioned that he "... was carried away by Richard Wagner's novel ideas in music, studied Goethe's works rooted in the tradition of Antiquity and Nietzsche's symbolist philosophy, got to know the philosophical systems of Kant and other thinkers" (ib. 4).

Beside the crystallization of contemporary sources, Damberg's turns to regarding the crossing points of the traditional and innovative aesthetics in writers' works. He points out the overlapping of realist and Modernist poetics in Latvian literature of the turn of the

19th – 20th centuries or ‘the transition period’ (*pārejas laikmets*) (ib. 7). A number of new forms of literary expression appeared within it, e.g. the ‘social direction in literature’ affected by the social thematic and naturalist expression. It was debated by Decadence with its cult of individualism, sensuality, and beauty. Viktors Eglītis (1877–1845) was one of the first to take up the experimental expression of Modernism including elements of Decadence in the first decade of the 20th century. The writers who were close to his manner were called by Dambergs ‘Viktors Eglītis’ group’ or ‘the school of Decadence’. Dambergs considered himself a representative of this school as well and he defined the use of novel devices of form and style as their priority task. Symbolism constitutes a significant segment of the twentieth-century Modernism. Dambergs provides an account for the notion of symbol, pointing out its origin in the world literature and first manifestations in Latvian literature.

Dambergs’ particular characteristics of the early twentieth-century Modernism regard this trend as a complex phenomenon citing the preceding culture types. Dambergs has made a judgement of those writers who, according to his statements and the classification of that time, ‘stood by’ (*stāvēja nomālus*) (Dambergs 1932: 7) as they applied the poetics of Romanticism, that sounds very present-day. He points out that Romanticism of the early twentieth century is not a direct transfer of the 19th century tradition, but is associated with using romanticist imagery and enriched by allusions to the elements of transcendental cognition.

Defining the early 20th century in relation to periodization, Volde-mārs Dambergs does not associate it with major socio-historical events, e.g. World War I or the foundation of Latvian Republic in 1918, but only and exclusively with new searching of poetics and form: “Around 1915 the ‘Sturm und Drang’ epoch of our literature came to an end as it entered the epoch of the rule of classical principles and creative methods” (ib. 6).

In the conclusion it must be noted that literary histories dedicated to particular periods or phenomena of literature provide a theoretically historical interpretation apart from the chronological or biographical overview of history. Voldemārs Dambergs in “The Twentieth Century in Latvian Literature” put a particular emphasis

on the origin of Modernism in the early twentieth-century Latvian literature. This was facilitated also by the personal experience of the author of this literary history. “The Twentieth Century in Latvian Literature” is one of the few works with this kind of strategy on the development of Latvian literary history. It includes significant supplements to the accepted fundamental investigations of the history of literature.

References

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