

The Modernist Opening in Latvia and Aesthetic Tension as a Catalyst for Change

My observations in this article start with the assumption that at each particular historical moment there is a tension between published histories of literature on the one hand, and contemporary literary processes on the other.

I will focus on one such moment in the history of Latvian culture and will try to show precisely how this tension provided a driving mechanism for development and to prove that this is characteristic of epochal changes in the overall spiritual climate of a culture.

For general background, I will first draw on some observations taken from *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (2007) edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, specifically the classification of literary institutions provided in the introductory article to the third volume of this work.

Professor Neubauer proposes the division of the development of the cultures of East-Central Europe during the last two centuries into three basic periods: 1) 1800–1890, the national awakenings and the institutionalization of literature, 2) 1890–1945, the literary institutions of modernism, 3) 1945–1989, the radical reform of the existing institutions under the communist regimes. (Cornis-Pope, Neubauer 2007: 1)

In the same introductory article, the editor stresses that there are variations within this rather strict (but indeed useful) periodization, e.g. the development and establishment of national institutions could only be completed after national states had been established; in the case of states that came into being later, the first two periods actually overlap at the turn of the 20th century.

In my article I will deal with the period during the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries, roughly covering the years between 1890 and

1918 with particular focus on the decade between 1905 and 1914. According both to Neubauer's scheme and the exceptions he allows, this period clearly had a Janus-faced character for the Baltic cultures.

On the one hand, the continuation of the 19th-century trends leading towards the consolidation of the national values¹ was clearly apparent; on the other hand, there was a turn towards topical modernist aesthetic ideas. We will examine both the late aspirations of the nation builders, as well as the new modern trends in art and their reception. The literary career of the Polish writer Stanisław Przybyszewski and the reception of his works and his ideas in Latvia will serve as a paradigmatic example for the latter point.

Returning once more to the notions used by Neubauer, we can familiarize ourselves with his two-part typology of the national awakening (ib. 3–4):

Modes of Social and Material Construction

1. Founding journals and newspapers in the vernacular
2. Establishing publishing houses
3. Founding literary and cultural societies
4. Staging plays in the vernacular
5. Building National Theatres and Opera Houses
6. Establishing National Academies
7. Establishing National Libraries
8. Establishing university chairs for the vernacular language and literature
9. Including the vernacular language and literature in the school curricula

¹ One manifestation of this trend was the writing of literary histories; it is important to remember that national literary histories serve a double purpose of describing the aesthetic as well as politically encouraging the historical development of each respective nation (in a certain sense participating in the creation of the history of the nation). It is this double function that has been at the core of the fact that national literary histories have had much broader dissemination than trans-national ones, even if both trends can be deciphered already at the birth of the modern institutionalized philology in the 19th century.

Modes of textual construction

1. Language revival
2. Translations into the vernacular
3. Writing lyric poetry in the vernacular
4. Collecting and publishing oral poetry
5. Editing and republishing older texts
6. Writing new national epics
7. Writing historical fiction
8. Canonizing national poets
9. Writing national literary histories

At the very end of the second list the notion of literary histories appears. These literary histories shine a light on the characteristic developmental mechanism for the aesthetic of a dawning era. And it is in this area where we discover attempts to canonize earlier writing, attempts which continue well into the period of the new modern aesthetic priorities in a parallel effort.

In Estonia, in the years preceding the First World War literary history, which summed up earlier efforts, was provided by Mihkel Kampmaa. In Latvian culture of the same period, we face a number of new literary histories, most (but not all) of which were written (like Kampmaa's volumes) for the purpose of teaching. To name only some, we have:

Teodors Zeiferts, *Latviešu rakstniecības hrestomātija*, 1905 – 1907

Jēkabs Līgotnis, *Latviešu literatūra*, 1906; *Latviešu literatūras vēsture*, 1908

Roberts Klaustiņš, *Latviešu rakstniecības vēsture skolām*, 1907

Vilis Plūdons, *Latvju rakstniecības vēsture*, 1908 – 1909

Andrejs Upīts, *Latviešu jaunākās rakstniecības vēsture*, 1911

It is especially striking that several of the histories that embodied the task of canonizing the national tradition had been created by writers who themselves at least partly belonged to the new generation of modernists, Plūdons being the most indicative example. The presence of this literary generation was especially influential after the 1905 uprising in the Russian Empire was put down. In their own

creative writing, these authors were looking towards a different set of values – let's call them European values – and making resolute attempts to break with tradition. It is mainly because of this desire to break with tradition that these young writers were labelled decadent and accusations of blasphemy and the like were commonplace.

This was not the first time in the history of East-Central Europe that political crisis provided inspiration for artistic innovation. One of the first such occasions was the development of Polish romanticism in the early 19th century. The Young Poland movement, which preceded similar aspirations in neighbouring countries, was triggered by an unsuccessful uprising in the Russian-dominated area of Poland in the middle of the century. Similarly, the modernist opening in the Baltic countries was linked to the 1905 uprising in tsarist Russia, which turned out to be a catalyst for radical transformations in the aesthetic priorities of young writers.

In this context, it is interesting to evaluate how these tendencies in Latvian culture were reflected in the impressive presence of the Polish modernist author Stanisław Przybyszewski who was at his most influential during the decade preceding the First World War. To illuminate the specific importance of Przybyszewski's writing we must sketch the historical context of his literary activity and mention the places in which the impact of his writing was felt. The first of these places was Germany.

Born in Poland in 1867, the young Stanisław Przybyszewski went to Berlin to study in the early 1890s. There he became both a renowned public figure and a leading member of the circle of young artists, predominantly of German and Scandinavian origin, who gathered in the "Black Piglet" tavern (*Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*). Among the most important personalities of this group were Edward Munch and August Strindberg. Przybyszewski also met the Norwegian woman Dagny Juel there, who later was to become his wife. These personal ties and Przybyszewski's own studies resulted in highly personal essays on philosophy, art, and artists (Nietzsche, Chopin, Munch and Vigeland among others) that soon brought the Polish author recognition in the German literary milieu. His early essays and novels were written in German, thus enabling direct contact with his local audience.

The next place where Przybyszewski's impact was felt was in Scandinavia when he spent some years in the mid-1890s in his wife's homeland, Norway. Although he remained relatively isolated from the literary and artistic life there, his opinions became increasingly well known to the Norwegian artistic community through his published discussions of the works of contemporary authors and artists, including many Scandinavians.

The next step in development was marked by Przybyszewski's return to his native Poland where he settled in Cracow and from 1897 became the editor of the most important modernist journal of that time, *Życie (Life)*. Even before his return to Poland, Przybyszewski had established a close co-operation with the Czech modernist publication, *Moderní revue pro literaturu, umění a život (Modern Review for Literature, Art, and Life)*, published in Prague beginning in 1894 by Arnošt Procházka in co-operation with Jiří Karásek. Through these publications Przybyszewski made a strong impact upon the late 19th- and early 20th-century Slavic and East-European cultures, including the vast Russian culture. Latvia is also squarely on this list.

However, the question we have set for ourselves is this: What was the impact of the strong presence of Przybyszewski's ideas on the Latvian literary scene? How can this be explained and what consequences were derived from it?

In the European context, the Polish author belonged to those writers who made the strongest arguments for the independence of the creative personality. Among other often-quoted expressions, it was Przybyszewski's idea of the "naked soul" of an individual (Nowakowska-Sito 1996: 27), which he constantly expressed in his essays and literary works from the beginning of the 1890s that appeared again and again in Latvian periodicals around and after 1905. For example, the manifesto of the Latvian modernist writers, published in the journal *Dzelme (The Depth)* in 1906, demonstrated direct opposition to the tradition of earlier nationalist writing by explicitly defining art's true purpose as delving into the "soul of the individual", which is like "a lake created by gods". Another manifesto was published even earlier, in 1905, in the foreword to Haralds

Eldgasts' novel *Zvaigžņotās nakts* (*Starlit Nights*) – a book that emulates Przybyszewski's 1896 novel *Homo sapiens*.

But the paradoxical nature of Przybyszewski's impact is brought home to us when we remember that he himself was the representative of a divided country where only the small area under Austrian rule was culturally open and self-reliant. So even in the case of Polish literature the notion of the "naked soul" of an individual was in direct contrast to an earlier national idea. Such an aesthetic was promoted by the nationally-oriented literary historian Bronisław Chlebowski who saw "the historically analyzed content of the *national soul*" (Cornis-Pope, Neubauer 2007: 347) in his own work.

So we can conclude that, if there still is a form of resistance to be discovered in Przybyszewski's writings, it is now completely relocated from the political to the aesthetic realm.

For Latvian literature, which thus far had taken its inspiration mostly from the so-called great cultures, this was an important additional signal for change and re-orientation. Change in aesthetic orientation followed rapidly through the promotion of more intense contacts with other cultures, including contacts with neighbouring countries Estonia and Lithuania.

It is also possible to locate this trend in the wider context of colonial resistance. For example, Elleke Boehmer's book *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (2002) provides several clues for relating the notions of postcolonial criticism and colonial relationships to the Baltic situation of the early 20th century.

First, Boehmer reminds us of the concept of "alterity", in which "the other – here, the brother or sister nation elsewhere in the empire – is simultaneously recognized as being distant and unknowable, yet as an entity pre-eminently to be taken into account, to be signalled towards". (Boehmer 2005: 19) Along with the works of other important literary figures, Przybyszewski's writings were such an anti-colonial signal for the Latvian cultural scene of the early 20th century that was still under the thumb of the Tsar. They were also a testimony to the fact that the self-manifestation of an artist can take not only the form of direct political resistance or promotion of

national ideology, but also that of individual self-fulfilment – a new aspect at the time.

It means that here we can add the observation that diverse forms of resistance stay interconnected under the specific circumstances of colonialism. As Boehmer puts it, “anti-colonial nationalisms [...] took over the premises of modernity (individualism, state-organized politics, and social improvement), yet adapted or married these to both native and other important forms of knowledge for anti-colonial purposes”. (Boehmer 2005: 7)

It is in this context that Przybyszewski’s personality and writing acquire their particular importance as directional signals for a newly distinct “modern culture” that must still establish itself as equal among the other familiar “national cultures” out of which it has arisen, while simultaneously treating the familiar aesthetic norms as targets for change in the modern world.

To conclude, the tension between the canon-creating national literary histories on the one, and modernist trends in art on the other hand, fit neatly into the overall pattern of change during this time period. A developmental dialectic between the “nation” and the “individual” was taking place in which both were moving through the same self-reflective, self-defining processes towards their, by necessity, separate goals.

The next step, which remains outside the scope of the present article, would be to argue – and perhaps to prove – that a similar mechanism might also be discovered at other specific historical turning points when historical evaluation (writing/publishing new literary histories) and aesthetic innovation simultaneously move to the fore as important issues. For the Latvian culture, such turning points in the 20th century could presumably be located in the 1930s, the late 1950s and the 1990s. Quite conceivably these processes would be interrelated with the developmental processes of the other East-Central European cultures.

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