

Für unsere Nationalen: The Baltic German Contribution to Latvian Poetry in the 19th Century

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Abstract. The article examines 19th-century Latvian literature within the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire (Kurzeme and Vidzeme), emphasising its emergence in the context of complex social, cultural and national inter-relations. Focusing on Latvian-language literary criticism, theory and poetry, the analysis traces the decisive influence of German (primarily Baltic German) culture, while demonstrating that Latvian literature evolved because of a gradual and fluid transition from a predominantly translated corpus into a national literature with its own agency. The study highlights the paradoxical yet foundational role of Baltic Germans in the rise of Latvian national literature. Through patronage, education and publication opportunities, Baltic Germans enabled the rise of the first Latvian poets and a new intelligentsia, gradually transferring literary production into Latvian hands. The article outlines three major areas of Baltic German contribution to Latvian poetry: (1) the establishment of poetic theory and terminology; (2) the landscape of 19th-century Latvian poetry; and (3) the function of local German literary culture as a crucial model during the formation of Latvia's national discourse in the latter half of the century. Ultimately, the study argues that 19th-century Latvian literature – which was situated between translation, imitation, adaptation and originality – constitutes a uniquely productive transitional phenomenon. It merits continued scholarly attention and necessitates the incorporation of Latvian-language texts by Baltic Germans into a broader, integrated framework of Baltic and Eastern-Central European literary history.

Keywords: poetics; Enlightenment; terminology; *ziņģe*; poetic models; poetry in transition

The development of Latvian literature in the 19th century unfolded within the complex web of social and national relationships in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire (Plakans 2011: 205–266; Ījabs 2023). The article explores that process by examining both poetry and works of literary criticism and theory,

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paying particular attention to their connections with Baltic German culture, whether direct or mediated. By tracing these influences, the study sheds light on how Latvian literary expression evolved during this period, highlighting a gradual and fluid transition from predominantly translated literary toward the emergence of a distinct national literature. The roots of Latvian culture – and, naturally, Latvian literature – are closely intertwined with German culture. This is hardly surprising, given the presence of Germans as the dominant social stratum and of German culture as the dominant culture in the Baltic region from the 13th century. Nevertheless, the claim put forward as early as 1916 by Alexis von Engelhardt (1868–1954) – “One cannot speak of a Latvian culture. Everything that Latvians perceive as culture, or that they have adopted as culture, is a German imitation” (von Engelhardt 1916: 203)² – must be regarded as an exaggeration. Although early publications by ethnic Latvian authors from the first half of the 19th century were based on German exemplars, models, and often ideas, they reveal the presence of personal experiences, self-reflection and civic consciousness in their poetry. In many cases, what connects their works with German culture is merely the form or the literary model. In its transitional phase from German to Latvian hands, 19th-century Latvian literature is not only worthy of scholarly investigation but genuinely fascinating precisely because of this transition, as well as because of the collision between free translation, imitation, adaptation and original ideas. Latvian literature of this period reveals and articulates much that was new about Latvian writers themselves.

Back to the literary contexts: although Baltic Germans often condemned the Young Latvian movement as a force that divided Baltic society, one of the movement’s most prominent representatives, the poet Auseklis (real name Miķelis Krogzemis, 1850–1879), justifiably argued that the movement was in fact the result of Baltic German activity:

*“Kam jaunlatviešus dīdat? / Kam viņus peklē bīdat?
Tie jūsu dētas olas, / Ko izperēja skolas!”*

(Why do you scold the Young Latvians? / Why do you drive them into hell? /
They are the eggs you yourselves have laid, / Hatched out by the schools!)
(Auseklis 1923: 181).³

² *Von einer lettischen Kultur kann nicht geredet werden. Alles, was an Kultur in den Letten steckt oder von ihnen angenommen wurde, ist deutscher Abklatsch.*

³ My translation. The poem is dated with the year 1875 or 1876 (Auseklis 1923: 316).

The central tension in this quatrain reflects the psychological opposition between the conservative Baltic German milieu – the implied addressees of the poem – and the leaders of the Latvian national awakening. These lines, written in the middle of the 1870s, delineate with remarkable precision the discursive framework in which the contributions of Baltic Germans to Latvian culture in general, and to 19th-century poetry in particular, should be viewed. Over centuries, from the period of Reformation onwards, Baltic Germans cultivated the intellectual and institutional conditions that in the 19th century enabled the emergence of Latvian national literature. The German *Volksaufklärung* (the Popular or Peasant Enlightenment), which reached the Baltic provinces at the turn of the 19th century, envisaged the fostering of talented individuals from among the peasantry, the *unsere Nationalen*, that is, the Latvians. It was through Baltic German patronage that the first Latvian poets came to prominence. They paved the way for the gradual formation of a new Latvian intelligentsia and the transformation of the literary process as it moved from Baltic German mediation into Latvian hands. The creator of the designation Young Latvians was the German pastor Gustav Brasche (1802–1883). He viewed the emerging Latvian intellectuals critically, but he nevertheless unwittingly conferred an identity upon them. By naming them Young Latvians, he effectively framed the Latvian intelligentsia as a national movement comparable to those of other European nations. In doing so, recent scholarship indicates, he also articulated the central aim of their activity, i.e. the creation of a New Latvia (Zelče 2020: 96).

The contributions of Baltic Germans to Latvian poetry will be discussed in three sections according to the main research question: how did Baltic German intellectual mediation shape the emergence of Latvian poetics and poetry, and how were these imported theoretical, linguistic and literary models transformed into a national literary system in the 19th century? The first part of the article argues that Baltic German intellectuals played a formative role in establishing the theoretical foundations of Latvian poetics, poetic terminology, poetic practice and poetic theory. The second part points out that the Baltic German literary culture played a decisive mediating role in shaping the landscape of Latvian poetry during the 19th century, especially through the translation of European poetry, the introduction of poetic forms and genres, the expansion of Latvian readership, and institutional literary practices. Thus, Baltic German intellectuals helped integrate Latvian-language writing into European literary culture. The third part argues that these processes contributed to the emergence of Latvian national literature by providing models that Latvian writers adapted in the construction of their own national poetic discourse.

The study employs a historical and discourse-analytical approach, which is combined with cultural transfer and translation theory to trace the development of Latvian poetics from Baltic German scholarly initiatives to its nationalisation during the 19th-century awakening. Through diachronic analysis, intertextual comparison and sociocultural contextualisation, it examines how poetic forms, terminology and institutions were introduced, adapted and reinterpreted within Latvian literary culture. Attention is given to translation as a mechanism of literary formation and social negotiation. According to Itmar Even-Zohar (2008), Latvian national literature could be regarded as a “new literature, that cannot immediately create texts in all types known to its producers ... and translated literature becomes in this way one of its most important systems” (Even-Zohar 2008: 201). On the other hand, at the beginning of the 19th century, Latvian literature was also a peripheral literature (Even-Zohar 2008: 201) with a long tradition of religious texts, including religious poetry (mainly church songs). As early as the 17th century and the age of Enlightenment, translated literature had become a major channel through which fashionable ideas were brought home, thus initiating innovations in the literary field following the abolishment of serfdom and during the period of national awakening.

The theoretical dimension: Baltic Germans and the discourse of Latvian poetics and poetry

The contributions of Baltic German pastors and their initiatives, which formed part of the emergence of Latvian poetic practice and theory in the mid-19th century, aided the shift into Latvian-language discourse and became integrated into the national culture narrative. Insight into this process will be given according to a chronological and analytical progression: a) proof of literary capability; b) the expansion of poetic theory and demonstrations of expressive capacity; c) the transmission of theoretical models to emerging Latvian poets; and d) the nationalisation of poetic discourse and its institutionalisation through terminology and language planning.

Proof of literary capability

Since Johann Wischmann's († c.1705) poetics *Unteutsche Opitz oder kurze Anleitung zur lettischen Dichtkunst* (Non-German Opitz, or a Short Introduction to the Latvian Art of Poetry, 1697), it has been evident that the Latvian language, like Latin and Greek, can sustain all literary genres. Wischmann, without problematising colonial entanglements or addressing

primarily German pastors serving in Latvian congregations, presented ample evidence of this: *Unteutsche Opitz* contains the first Latvian acrostic, chronogram, sonnet and Pindaric ode, along with examples of the Sapphic stanza, the Alexandrine and the hexameter. Thus, by the end of the 17th century Wischmann had already demonstrated the literary capacity of Latvian as a fully-fledged literary language comparable to classical languages. At the same time this also represented the earliest theoretical intervention. Wischmann had no doubt that both the language and the historical experience of indigenous people were deemed adequate for literary purposes. He even pointed to the so-called *Kuršu kōniņi* (the Curonian Kings) – rich peasants from Kurzeme and former vassals of the Livonian Order – and their destiny as potential dramatic material (Wischmann 1697: 141). Thus, his suggestion that Latvian history could provide material for tragedy further extended this claim from simply having a formal capability to also being thematically suitable.

The expansion of poetic theory and demonstrations of expressive capacity

In the 18th century, Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714–1796) continued the above-mentioned trajectory by incorporating poetic theory and examples of an ode, a fable and pastoral poetry into his Latvian grammar (Stender 1761; Stender 1783). His translation of German baroque poet Barthold Heinrich Brockes's (1680–1747) "Die Nachtigall" (The Nightingale) served as empirical proof of the expressive richness of Latvian, demonstrating its lexical abundance and stylistic flexibility. Within six stanzas Brockes deployed fifteen Latvian synonyms for the verb 'to sing' (Stender 1761: 209), which is comparable to the sixteen that appear in the original (Brockes). Slightly more than a hundred years later, the Young Latvians retrospectively interpreted Stender's work as a part of the cultural genealogy of Latvian literature. One of the leaders of the Latvian National Awakening, the educator, public figure and publicist Atis Kronvalds (1837–1875) used this masterpiece to demonstrate Stender's deep knowledge of Latvian (Kronvalds 1937). In his polemical essay "Nationale Bestrebungen" (National Efforts, I–II 1872) Kronvalds described Stender as a "*dieser herculische Geist*" or Herculean spirit (Kronvalds 1872: 28). Kronvalds's ideological associate the Young Latvian Krišjānis Valdemārs (1825–1891) began his first collection, *300 stāsti* (300 Stories, 1853), with a portrait of Stender. Thus, Stender, as a Baltic German Enlightenment figure during the period of national awakening, was transformed steadily into an icon of national cultural memory, playing an important role in the construction of the narrative of Latvian cultural history. His name was further consolidated through literary histories, school-oriented anthologies, and other publications.

The transmission of theoretical models to emerging Latvian poets and the nationalisation of poetic discourse

In the first half of the 19th century, this trajectory of Latvian poetics was continued by Baltic German pastor Karl Hugenberger (1784–1860), who in 1855 shifted his theoretical articles from a German (Hugenberger 1830), towards a Latvian, readership (Hugenberger 1855; Hugenberger 1856). By then, the first generation of Latvian poets had emerged, with the year 1856 seeing the publication of *Dziesmiņas* (Little Songs) by Juris Alunāns (1832–1864); this polemical collection is widely regarded as the beginning of Latvian national poetry. In his studies of versification and metrics, Alunāns drew explicitly upon Hugenberger's ideas and insights. Thus, for example, one of the few poems – entitled “Līgas svētki” (The Feast of Līga) (Alunāns 1859) – in which he uses a motif from Latvian folklore both in form and in content, including through the use of the same euphonic elements, is nothing other than a paraphrase of a poem by Hugenberger (Hugenberger 1830: 63). Alunāns uses a hexametric poem dedicated to Hugenberger to point out Hugenberger's outstanding talent in Latvian poetry (Alunāns 1860). Hugenberger's translations, especially the translations of Weimar classics and Heinrich Heine into Latvian, are recognised as the most artistically valuable of the entire translation heritage of Enlightenment era Baltic German people, even today (Daija 2025: 169). Thus, Alunāns's engagement with Hugenberger – visible in his metrics studies and poetic adaptations – illustrated how Baltic German theoretical frameworks informed the emergence of Latvian national poetry. Through the members of the Latvian Awakening such as Juris Alunāns, Atis Kronvalds and Ernests Dinsbergs (1816–1902) the discourse of poetic theory was transferred into the Latvian intellectual space. The first Latvian treatises on poetics were published in periodicals (Kronvalds 1869). Dinsbergs's *Metrika ar tām vajadzīgām dzejas mākslas ziņām* (Versification or Studies in the Art of Poetry), the first book on poetics written by a Latvian, appeared in 1890 when Dinsbergs was already 74. Being a conservative, self-taught schoolteacher, he nonetheless grounded his theoretical reflections on conceptual models and translated examples originating in Baltic German scholarship, thus demonstrating the continuity of intellectual influence.

Institutionalisation through terminology and language planning

The evolution of poetic terminology reflects the same dynamic. As literary scholar Julija Boguna has aptly observed: “Translation supports development, teaching, and language ennoblement: translation policy is language policy”

(Boguna 2019: 293).⁴ Early Baltic German pastors and linguists often introduced German-based loanwords or calque by figuratively tossing a bone from the lord's table when coining terms for new phenomena. Thus, with Stender, the term *ziņģe* (from German *singen*, 'to sing') was established as a designation for secular songs and poems. Slightly later *perša* came from the German *Vers* for a line of verse, and *rīme* from German *Reim* or 'rhyme'. Both also later appear in the title of Hugenberger's above-mentioned theoretical essay. Yet it was precisely the Baltic Germans who laid the foundations of what Boguna terms *sprachnobilitierende Bestrebungen*, or language ennoblement. This can be seen in the terminology coined by Gustav Brasche and Gustav Bergmann (1749–1814): instead of the loanword *Reim* (Lat. *rīme*), for example, they introduced *skandeklis* and *atskaņa*, thereby deriving Latvian poetic terminology directly from the native root *skaņa* (sound) (Draviņš 1933: 133). Thus, they anticipated the language modernization that would be associated with the Latvian national movement. In 1830, the German pastor Jacob Florentin Lundberg (1782–1858) published the first article explicitly devoted to Latvian terminology and the coinage of new words (Lundberg 1830b). It is plausible that, just as Alunāns drew on Hugenberger's poetics, so too he drew inspiration from Lundberg's essay for the project of modernising the Latvian language. The linguistic dimension reinforced the broader argument that translation and terminology-building function as instruments of literary and cultural development. Thus, the Baltic German intellectual tradition functioned as a mediating framework through which Latvian poetry evolved from a missionary and scholarly project into a national literary system.

1. Baltic Germans and the landscape of Latvian poetry

Baltic German intellectuals, most of whom were pastors in Latvian congregations, helped integrate Latvian-language writing into European literary culture through high-quality translations of European poetry, the introduction of poetic forms and genres, and the expansion of a Latvian readership. At the same time, these processes contributed to the emergence of Latvian national literature, first by enabling the literary participation of Latvians within a German-dominated cultural space, and later by providing models that Latvian writers adapted in the construction of their own national poetic discourse. Taken together, the following sections will demonstrate the multi-staged

⁴ Übersetzung dient sprachfertigenden, sprachdidaktischen und sprachnobilitierenden Bestrebungen: Übersetzungspolitik ist Sprachpolitik. [My translation]

process through which Baltic German literary activity shaped the emergence of Latvian poetry.

Translation as the initial mechanism of literary formation

Vitaly Chernetsky (2011), in comparing the origins of various national literatures, observed that “secular, vernacular translation has often helped to initiate national literary traditions” (Chernetsky 2011: 34). The Latvian linguist Andrejs Veisbergs is even more direct: “The Latvian nation is born in translation” (Veisbergs 2014: 102). Veisbergs points unmistakably to the Baltic German legacy and the extensive corpus of translations in the 19th century, through which Latvian literary culture entered the European literary sphere. Here, only a few aspects of this will be considered. At the beginning of the 19th century, the abolition of serfdom foregrounded the question of Latvian emancipation. The first decades following this, the era of *Volksaufklärung*, were marked by new cultural phenomena, such as translations (that were faithful to the original) of high-quality German poetry by Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and later also by Heinrich Heine, sometimes with multiple renderings of a single poem or ballad. The year 1829 marked a breakthrough: the publication of three different Latvian translations of Schiller’s *Bürgschaft* (The Pledge, 1799) (Schiller 1829: 121–126). This event introduced into the German-dominated cultural space a Latvian teacher, Miķelis Aumanis, who began the gradual process of undermining colonial assumptions of the peasantry’s unsuitability for entry into the European – in this case, Schillerian – poetic world. In a subsequent review, Baltic German Pastor Christian Wilhelm Brokhhusen (1768–1842) was compelled to admit that Aumanis “... has understood Schiller’s poem, that is clear from the work” (Brokhhusen 1829: VII).⁵ The example of the 1829 publication illustrates the important symbolic moment when a Latvian translator entered a literary field previously dominated by Baltic Germans and demonstrated that Latvian-language readers and writers could participate in the reception of canonical European poetry. Thus, translation functioned not only as a means of cultural transfer but also of renegotiating social hierarchies within colonial Baltic society. Yet in the first half of the century, the Baltic German critical discourse on Latvian readiness to appreciate artistically accomplished poetry remained ambivalent. There are both staunch defenders of colonial hierarchy and advocates of Latvian emancipation. These divergent views reveal not so much

⁵ “... verstanden hat er das Schillers Gedicht, das geht aus der Arbeit klar hervor.” (My translation)

the dynamics between emancipators and the emancipated as tensions within German society itself.

The hexameter debate as evidence of tensions within Baltic German discourse

The next example will explore the debate on the ability of Latvian readers to engage with complex poetic forms, such as hexameter. In 1822 and 1823 the Courland pastor Karl Friedrich Watson (1777–1826) published in a Latvian almanac some fragments of his hexametric translations of the Lithuanian poet Kristijonas Donelaitis's (1714–1780) "Metai" (The Seasons, 1765–1775) (Donaleitis 1821; Donaleitis 1822), noting the suitability of hexametric verse for reading aloud in Latvian schools, especially since these poems dealt with themes close to the peasants' experience (Watson n.d.). At that time, alongside hymnals the almanac was among the most widely read publications in Latvian. Watson did not even question the assumed level of comprehension of his intended readers. Eight years later, however, pastor Lundberg published a hexametric translation of an idyll by Johann Heinrich Voss (1751–1826). It was accompanied by a German-language disclaimer that the text was not intended for "the entertainment of our nationals" but for connoisseurs of the Latvian language, i.e., Germans (Lundberg 1830a: 69). Watson and Lundberg clearly demonstrated the ambivalence within Baltic German intellectual circles toward Latvian readers. The disclaimer probably served as a defensive gesture toward sceptical German colleagues rather than a reflection on Latvian readers' actual capacities. In the same year, 1830, probably with Lundberg's support, his literary apprentice, the Latvian poet Ansis Līvontāls (1803–1878), published his first work: a translation of Johann Friedrich Schlotterbeck's (1765–1840) popular ballad "Walter Myrtill, der verlorene Sohn" (Walter Myrtill, The Prodigal Son, ca. 1790) (Schlotterbeck 1830). Though not in hexameter, it demonstrated that Līvontāls not only commanded German but possessed sufficient comprehension to translate German poetry. A few years later, it was notably in the form of Schiller's ode that Līvontāls would publish socially critical verses. The "imagined addressee" here clearly transcended the social and cultural boundaries imposed by Baltic German society (Grudule 2023a). The Baltic German clergy was not as unified in its relations with Latvians as it might appear. Many German pastors lived quite literally within their preconceived notions about imagined Latvians, their abilities and their knowledge. Others, many of whom were directly involved in the growth and development of the first generation of Latvian poets, clearly saw that the debate about *unsere Nationalen* and their supposed capacities lacked any foundation. Latvian authors were fully capable of appropriating European poetic forms and

using them for their own cultural and ideological purposes. Together, these examples reveal that the debate about Latvian literary competence reflected internal tensions within Baltic German society, rather than a simple opposition between colonisers and colonised.

The opening of the literary field to Latvian authors

The gradual inclusion of Latvian writers in the literary sphere represents the next stage of development, and at this point the rise of Latvian national culture could not be halted. The local literary space, as Aiga Šemeta (2019) has shown, was gradually opened to the presence of Latvians through opportunities for publication in Baltic German-established Latvian periodicals, through the cautious inclusion of the first generation of Latvian writers in the German-dominated *Lettisch-Literärische Gesellschaft* (Latvian Literary Society), and through reviews, polemical articles and debates that provided the necessary environment, models and tools for the development of Latvian national culture and poetry (Šemeta 2019). These developments provided infrastructure, models, and intellectual tools that facilitated the formation of Latvian national literature. The Baltic German literary environment functioned as an intermediary cultural framework within which Latvian literary activity could emerge and expand.

Engagement with folklore

Baltic Germans were also the first to incorporate elements of Latvian folk song and ethnographic motifs into literature, particularly during the early 19th century, known as the Romantic period (Boehlendorff 1824; Stender 1805: 40–42; etc.). Their work in collecting and publishing folk songs contributed to the preservation of oral traditions and encouraged Latvians themselves in the second half of the 19th century, during the period of national awakening, to undertake this work. Thus, as Latvian researcher Pauls Daija has noted, they created a heritage that could be “returned to the Latvians themselves” (Daija 2025: 306). This process also created a path toward the refinement of national poetry and ultimately toward the emergence of the Latvian national epic *Lāčplēsis* (Bearslayer, 1888) by poet Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902) in the second half of the century.

The expansion of readership through the genre of the *ziņģe*

While translation and genre-formation shaped elite literary culture, the popular song genre *ziņģe* (Grudule 2021) played a crucial role in expanding Latvian readership and facilitating the transition from an oral to a reading culture. Developed and popularised by Gotthard Friedrich Stender, these songs combined simple language, memorable rhythms and melodies often borrowed from German operettas, the so-called *Sing-spiele*. They addressed the everyday experience of rural Latvian audiences and circulated widely through inexpensive publications and choral repertoires. Latvian scholar Ināra Klekere-Krekele has pointed to Stender's collections as a success story in Latvian book culture: in the first half of the 19th century, there were some 12, 000 copies, surpassing any other contemporary publication in Latvian, and they were still being reissued as late as 1883 (Klekere-Krekele 2011: 16). Stender's translated German songs formed a significant part of the repertoire in the first Latvian choral songbooks and remained popular among choirs in the latter half of the century (Šepsky 1881: 14–15).⁶ Their remarkable popularity shows how Baltic German literary production contributed directly to the spread of literacy and reading practices among Latvians. Moreover, the genre inspired local schoolteachers and amateur poets, who continued the tradition and adapted it to new political and cultural contexts. They did not hide their debt to Stender, explicitly invoking his name and using the word *ziņģe* in the titles of their own publications. Both the melodies and the form of the *ziņģe* circulated from one collection to another until at least 1905 (Anon. 1905). Stender's *ziņģes* were paraphrased, and those originating in the Enlightenment era continued to fulfil an informative function within Latvian society, in which literacy was still emerging throughout the 19th century, serving as a bridge between Enlightenment didactic literature and the emerging national culture. Through small-format books and publications in the conservative Latvian press, they reached readers even in the most remote rural areas. Their presence in the countryside is further attested to in depictions of peasant life that appeared in the works of Latvian writers such as Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908) and Jēkabs Zeibolts (1867–1924) at the turn of the 19th century and into the 20th century. The *ziņģes* retained their popularity in the countryside as late as the 1960s, when they were still offered to folklore collectors as Latvian folk songs (Apinis, Čakars, Klekere 2001: 279–280).

⁶ Nr. 8 *Pēc daiļas ciema meitiņas* (Original: Ein Mädchen, dass auf Ehre hielt. Ch. Weiße / J.A. Hiller).

3. Baltic German literary culture as a model for Latvian literary institutions and a retrospective recognition of the literary ‘apprenticeship’

Toward the close of the era of the Latvian national awakening, in the second half of the 19th century, collegial, direct and unmediated contacts were formed between several Latvian and Baltic German writers, leading to reciprocal cultural exchange. For example, this occurred between the Latvian writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis and the local German poet Viktor von Andrejanoff (1857–1895) (Volkova 2007), as well as between the Baltic German female poets Elfriede Eckardt-Skalberg (1884–1964), Martha von Dehn-Grubbe (1898–1967) and Elisabeth Braunz-Goercke (1888–1966) and several Latvian composers and poets (Grudule 2023b). The colonial order was crumbling, and translation in both directions became a mutually enriching practice that facilitated direct cultural dialogue. Equally important was the institutional and methodological influence of Baltic German literary scholarship. As Michel Espagne noted, “It takes literary history and a historiography to constitute a nation. The tools to build identity have a tendency to suppress and conceal imported materials by reinterpreting them, as they move from one context to another” (Espagne 2021: 37). Early Latvian literary histories and anthologies adopted structural models from Baltic German works, examples of which include literary-historical surveys (Grudule 2023a) and anthologies of particular poets with biographical commentary. Thus, the second edition of Latvian writer and teacher Matīss Kaudzīte’s (1848–1926) anthology of local poetry *Smaidi un asaras* (Smiles and Tears, 1895), which included portraits introducing the works of Latvian poets and biographical information about them at the end of the book, reflected the model of Jeannot Emil Freiherr von Grotthuß’s (1865–1920) recently published anthology of Baltic German poetry (Grotthuß 1894). Such works, though composed in different national contexts, functioned to strengthen national self-consciousness. They continue to serve as valuable reference sources in literary history, as they demonstrated that Latvian intellectuals did not merely receive literary forms but actively appropriated and reshaped Baltic German scholarly models for the purposes of national cultural construction.

From the early 19th century, when German-language European lyric was adapted, transformed and transported to an imagined Latvian reader during the period of popular Enlightenment, to the late 19th century, the local German literary sphere became, for Latvian intellectuals, a source of inspiration and a model worthy of emulation. At the same time, Baltic German lyric translated into Latvian still today remains an important corpus for the study of translation

history in Latvia; its most accomplished examples form a respected part of the shared Baltic and European literary space.

A telling testimony to this dynamic appeared in 1907 in Vilis Plūdons's (1874–1940) reader *Latvju rakstnieki: daiļliterāras hrestomātija skolām un pašizglītībai* (Latvian Writers: A Fiction Anthology for Schools and Self-Education). This anthology, the first of its kind, stands as a striking confirmation of the expanding number of school- and self-educated readers through the process described above. Reflecting on the formation of Latvian national literature under the influence of German culture, Plūdons acknowledged with dignity that other literatures, too, had “passed through their school years” (Plūdons 1907: 18–19) before achieving maturity and originality, just as the Romans had imitated the Greeks, the French of the 16th and early 17th centuries had borrowed much from Italians and Spaniards, and German and Russian literatures had once stood under English and French influence. Thus, translation and borrowing, or diffusion, to use a term used by Franco Moretti (Moretti 2013: 127), turned out not to be signs of dependence but rather a normal stage in the maturation of national literature. In the anthology, by juxtaposing the works of poets from various nations that had served as sources of inspiration for Latvian originals and by presenting multiple translations of the same poem for comparison, Plūdons invited readers to evaluate quality. In this framework, Baltic German poets stand in harmonious dialogue alongside Russians, Latvians, Lithuanians and the Germans of Western Europe.

Conclusions

The formative role of Baltic German literary culture in the development of Latvian poetry during the 19th century has been outlined in terms of its structural, pedagogical and discursive significance. Baltic Germans established the foundations of literary theory and terminology, as well as of virtually all major poetic genres in Latvian. They also pioneered the integration of Latvian folk song elements into translated poetry, while simultaneously collecting and publishing folk songs and encouraging Latvians to do the same. As a result, they created a cultural heritage that could later be appropriated and refined by Latvians themselves, ultimately enabling the emergence of national poetry. A crucial mechanism in this process was the transition from an oral to a reading culture among less-educated Latvians through songs and trivial poetry. Introduced by Gotthard Friedrich Stender, *ziņģes* – adaptations and translations of German popular songs and fables – combined accessible language, memorable rhythms and familiar rural imagery. Circulating widely through small-format books, newspapers and choral repertoires, they

reached rural audiences throughout the 19th century and beyond, significantly expanding literacy and readership. Their popularity persisted well into the 20th century, to the extent that they were later perceived as authentic folk songs.

In the latter half of the 19th century, as the Latvian national awakening progressed and the colonial order weakened, Baltic German literary culture increasingly served as a model for Latvian poetic discourse. Direct, collegial exchanges between Latvian and Baltic German writers fostered reciprocal translation and mutual influence. Latvian writers adopted institutional and historiographic models, as is evidenced by early Latvian literature and poetry anthologies. Ultimately, Baltic German literature in Latvian functioned both as a catalyst for national literary self-consciousness and as an integral component of a shared Baltic and European literary space.

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