

*The Formation of Latvian Literary Identity  
at the End of the Nineteenth – the Beginning  
of the Twentieth Century: Overlapping Vectors  
of Reception*

The issue of national literary identity is a complex problem that is related to a common view of discourses of culture and social anthropology. Literary identity is a system of codes that may refer to just one particular national literature and express both its canonical features and processes in its periphery. Literary identity is changing in time. It depends on the poetic style of writers and affects the readers' understanding of culture.

Latvian literary identity is closely related to the processes of the history of Latvian literature. The formation of modern Latvian literature dates back to the early nineteenth century, however, the origin of really balanced search of form and content is most often attributed to Juris Alunāns' poetry collection *Dziesmiņas, latviešu valodai pārtulkotas* (Songs translated for the Latvian language) that was published in Tartu (Dorpat) in 1856 and contains Alunāns' translations from different languages of the poetry by Horace, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich von Schiller, Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Heinrich Heine, etc. This collection is noteworthy for crystallizing of an important concept of Latvian literature of the mid-nineteenth century, i.e. for a young national literature to develop its identity, a thorough study of classical literature and the improvement of Latvian literary language were needed. These features are manifest in the genre, form, and content of two fundamental texts of the second half of the nineteenth century: the Kaudzītes brothers' novel *Mērnīeku laiki* (1879) (Times of Land Surveyors) and Andrejs Pumpurs' epic *Lāčplēsis* (1888) (Bearslayer).

Accumulation of knowledge of foreign literature became an essential component in the formation of Latvian literary identity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Extension of the range of vectors affecting Latvian literary identity was observed, including influences of various national literatures and their 'iconic' representatives that determined a rapid formation of multilayered Latvian literary identity.

## The German vector

The last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century were the years when Latvian culture was closely related to German culture. Latvian literary identity is deeply rooted in German classical literature. Some samples of Friedrich von Schiller's (1759–1805) poetry translations into Latvian appeared already in 1804–1805, yet the majority of translations (about 40) were published in Latvian periodicals in the 1870–90s. At that time the major plays by Schiller were staged as well – *The Robbers* (Die Räuber), *Luise Miller* (Kabale und Liebe), *The Maid of Orleans* (Die Jungfrau von Orleans), etc.

Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) is another German author whose poetry has been much translated since the 1870s. *Latviešu tulkotās beletristikas rādītājs*<sup>1</sup> (1902) (The index of translated fiction in Latvian) by Āronu Matiss lists about 190 poems by Heine that between 1871 and 1901 were published in various Latvian periodicals. The majority of them were translated by Latvian writers of that time: Ernests Dinsbergs (Dinsbergis) and Janševkis as well as Pavasaru Jānis, Atis Kronvalds, Auseklis, Jānis Poruks and many others.

Along with Heine, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) is another 'icon' of German culture often mentioned by Latvian authors (Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Sudrabu Edžus, Vilis Plūdōnis, etc.). Goethe's poetry and plays were translated at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the major event was publishing of the translation of Goethe's *Faust* in 1896 and 1897 in the monthly "*Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts*". The translation was produced by Jānis Plieķšāns, little known at the time, who after some decades became the most famous Latvian poet and playwright, Rainis (1865–1929). Translating of foreign classical literature had a great impact on the growth of Rainis' creative personality facilitating the development of his original style on the basis of profound studies of world classics. The translation of *Faust* opened for Latvians not only the abundance of Goethe's ideas and poetic motifs that were extremely suggestive impulses for a number of Latvian writers and poets (Aleksandrs Dauge, Rainis, Poruks, etc.) but also enhanced the development and growth of Latvian literary language.

Hermann Sudermann (1857–1928) entered the Latvian cultural space in 1886 when his sketch *Homeland* (Heimat) was published in J. Laimnieks' translation. The translations of his short stories, novels, and plays were published in the 1890s. Literary scholar Inguna Daukste-Silasproģe writes that

<sup>1</sup> Āronu Matisa *Latviešu tulkotās beletristikas rādītājā*. Rīga: Kalniņš un Deutčmans, 1902.

“at the end of the 19th century among Latvian writers there was a growing interest caused by staging of Hermann Sudermann’s and Gerhard Hauptmann’s plays in the opportunities offered by naturalist aesthetics” (Daukste-Silasprōģe 2005: 564; here and in the following translation is mine – M.B.). A wide resonance in Latvian culture was caused by the staging of Sudermann’s play *Honour* (Die Ehre) on 13 February 1894:

Hermann Sudermann was one of those modern German writers who had a great impact on the spiritual life in Latvia of his time. Besides, this impact did not concern only Latvian literature but mainly theatre and public life in Latvia. It is supposed that the staging of Sudermann’s play “Honour” [...] was one of the cornerstones that differentiated the young generation of Latvian intelligentsia from the old one, activating even more the time of changes enhanced by the approaching turn of the century. It must be noted that Hermann Sudermann’s drama “Honour” was the first staging of modern German drama in Latvia. (Ib. 605)

In April of the same year (1894), Riga Latvian Theatre staged Aspazija’s play *Zaudētās tiesības* (The Lost Rights) that caused long debates and associations with the artistic world created by Sudermann (ib. 607).

It must be noted that the names of Aspazija and Rainis were related to the reception of Gerhard Hauptmann (1862–1946) in Latvia, as Rainis in 1896 started translating Hauptmann’s symbolic play *Hannele* (Hanneles Himmelfahrt). Slightly later he translated also the play *The Sunken Bell* (Die versunkene Glocke) and wrote several articles on it as well. In the course of time Hauptmann became “one of the most often staged modern playwright in Latvia” (ib. 613). Latvian audience appreciated in the stagings of his plays images of people who are “so direct in their humaneness” (ib.).

The appearance of translations of modern German literature in Latvian had a significant impact on the development of Latvian literary modernism. The publication of the collection *Modernā vācu lirika* (Modern German lyric) in 1913 in St. Petersburg prepared by the publisher Ansis Gulbis was an important event in the reception of modern German literature. The poetry in the collection had been translated and selected by Vilis Plūdōnis (the majority of poems had been previously published in press periodicals). The collection comprised 179 poems by 55 German poets. This anthology caused wide debates in Latvian press on the understanding of the notion “modern”, relations of naturalism and modernism.

Integration of European culture into Latvian culture in the late nineteenth century also focused on the philosophical ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. The first publication in 1896 in the newspaper "Baltijas Vēstnesis"<sup>2</sup> that provided general information on Nietzsche was prepared by the editor of the paper, N. Puriņš. It was followed in 1898 by a long article on Nietzsche's biography<sup>3</sup> as well as publications of fragments of separate works and philosophical ideas or their reproductions. Special interest in Nietzsche's personality peaked in 1900, the year of his death, with the publication of fragments of Nietzsche's works<sup>4</sup> translated by the Latvian writer, Rūdolfs Blaumanis basically from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Also sprach Zarathustra) was fully translated by Plūdonis (1908). Interest in Nietzsche did not diminish in the following years either<sup>5</sup>. The publication of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the journal of early modernists "Zalktis" (Adder) was justified by the popularity of its author in Europe, Russia, and Latvia: "[...]our seriously-minded society must be given an opportunity to know everything about Nietzsche. [...] We must know and test Nietzsche's views as the world and literature are full of his fame and negation. We must take a stand against Nietzsche."<sup>6</sup>

Interest in Nietzsche in the Latvian cultural space until the occupation of Latvia in 1940 was growing: "The echo or counter-echo of Nietzsche's teachings were present in almost every Latvian writer's work in the early twentieth century." (Kursite 1999: 394–395)

Readers of the time demonstrated different attitudes towards Nietzsche: some accepted and quoted the philosopher with rapture, others objected to the innovative ideas of the philosopher, still others saw a transient whim of fashion in them and did not accept or reject them. Nietzsche's philosophy affected the identity of Latvian literature at least in three aspects: first with modelling of a new alienated space, second, with cyclical time perception and the idea of

<sup>2</sup> *Baltijas Vēstnesis* 1896, Nr. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Baumans E. *Baltijas Vēstneša pielikums* 1898, Nr. 125, 131, 137, 142.

<sup>4</sup> Fragments from the book „Tā runāja Zaratustra” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*): „Par draugu” (On friend), „Par šķīstību” (On chastity), „Par vecām un jaunām sieviņām” (On old and young wives) and others, e.g., „Sakāmvārdi un starpspēles” (Proverbs and interludes).

<sup>5</sup> Bitners, V. *Nietzsche un viņa darbi*. Valmiera: J. Ozola druk., 1909. V. Bitners (1865–1921) published a wide research „Nietzsche un viņa darbi” (*Nietzsche and his works*) where he widely analyzed Nietzsche's philosophy and conditions of its development referring to Ernest Horneffer's lectures on Nietzsche. This was the most extensive essay on Nietzsche in Latvian that had been translated from Russian and published before World War I (translated by Abaviētis).

<sup>6</sup> *Zalktis* Nr. 3, 1908, 146. lpp.

eternal return, third, with the conception of superhuman as an opposite to the man of the crowd.

### The Nordic vector

German culture at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century showed a great interest in Nordic writers, especially those whose extravagant poetics and searches in bringing together naturalism and symbolism (August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen) or stream of consciousness elements (Knut Hamsun) attracted many publishers and readers in Germany and stimulated Latvian publishers to take over Nordic literary innovations and offer them to the Latvian readership. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910) gained a great importance in the Latvian cultural space along with Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) August Strindberg (1849–1912), and Knut Hamsun (1859–1952).

Bjørnson's work was first published in Latvian in 1879. It was one of the writer's first texts, *Arnis* (1859). In 1893 the first volume of the Norwegian writer's works was published in Liepāja with eight translations of Bjørnson's works as well as a preface covering his biography. Ibsen's plays were selected for staging at the early stage of his reception according to the topical events of public and cultural life in Latvia.

Ibsen had a great impact on the development of Latvian drama and modernist literature. Benedikts Kalnačs in his monograph *Ibsena zīmē* (Under the Sign of Ibsen) admits that Ibsen's impact can be observed in the works of such Latvian writers as Aspazija, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Rainis, Jānis Akuraters, Mārtiņš Zīverts, Lelde Stumbre as well as their acknowledgements of the specificity of drama (Kalnačs 2000: 5). Ibsen's plays became the mediators of intense accumulation of the experience of European and Nordic culture.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Latvian culture got acquainted with the concepts of positivist philosophy or their initiated expression in various art genres, the dominant of national romanticism was replaced by realism and naturalism initiated by Western European culture in fiction, theatre, and other kinds of art. In this context the perception of Ibsen's plays was developed relating them to the topical developments in Latvian literature. (Burima 2007: 26–27)

Ibsen's plays have been staged in Latvia since 1889. Around that time publications of several plays by Ibsen appeared as well along with reviews and essays on Ibsen's biography and writing.

Translations of Knut Hamsun's works started appearing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, his essays on literature were published already in the late 1890s. The first novel by Hamsun translated into Latvian was *Victoria* published in 1900 in the paper "Tēvijā" (In Homeland). The first novel published in a book was *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890) in E. Jansons' and Antons Austrīņš' translation that came out in 1904 in Valmiera. Almost all of Hamsun's works have been translated into Latvian. The Norwegian writer has had an immense impact on Latvian literature. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, straight after the publication of Hamsun's works, Latvian writers started borrowing not only the peculiarities of his style but also episodes, images, names of characters from his works.

The Swedish writer and playwright August Strindberg's works entered Latvian cultural space starting with 1894 when his story *Love and Bread* in Augusts Deglavs' translation was included in a small collection *Cittautu rakstniecība I* (Foreign Literature I). The first play by Strindberg staged in Latvian was *The Father* (*Fadren*) in New Riga Theatre in 1908. However, the subtle heightened psychologism of Strindberg's plays was a great and even an excessive challenge for Latvian culture of that time:

Strindberg's radical modernism won the world of theatre in Latvia with a certain shift of time. [...] It is clear that the process of familiarizing with Strindberg's plays in Latvia was much more complex and slower than, e.g. the reception of Henrik Ibsen's works. (Kalnačs 2002: 208)

Latvia received also impulses from Finnish literature. Arno Jundze in his monograph *Somijas literatūra Latvijā 1885–2001* (Finnish literature in Latvia 1885–2001) comes to the conclusion that "at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dazzling flash of souls of the giants of Nordic literature aroused in many Latvian writers an intention to express themselves in writing". (Jundze 2002: 7)

Apart from German and Nordic vectors, Russian and Polish literatures were also of great importance in the formation of Latvian literature identity.

### The Slavic vector

The spread of Russian culture in Latvia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was determined by the contemporary political processes, particularly the inclusion of the territory of Latvia in the Russian Empire. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reception of

Russian literature was associated with mystically philosophical impulses and the impact of realist narrative. Impulses of realism and naturalism came also from less translated works by realists of other literary traditions that were most often perceived through Russian culture. Hence, on 29 May 1892 was the first night of Honoré de Balzac's (1799–1850) play *Stepmother* (the manuscript of the translation of this play is signed by 1886 in translation of Jēkabs Upeslejs); in 1898 in the paper *Tēvijā* Anna Rūmane's article on recent French literature was published where the author gives the characteristics of the personality of Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880); Guy de Maupassant's (1850–1893) prose fiction was also quite extensively translated. The publication of Maupassant's short stories was issued in Liepāja in 1897 in Jēkabs Janševskis' translation. In the 1880–90s, about ten translations of Charles Dickens' (1812–1870) works appeared that were basically published in the periodical *Dienas Lapa* (Daily page). However, the majority of realist and naturalist works that were translated into Latvian belong to Russian literature. The research by Vera Vāvere and Georgijs Mackovs *Latviešu – krievu literārie sakari* (Latvian – Russian Literary Contacts) points out that “the influence of Russian classical literature facilitated the consolidation of realism in Latvian literature as well as the development of critical realism in the work of many famous Latvian writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.” (Вавере, Матсков 1965: 5).

In 1879 in the paper edited by Bernhards Dīriķis, *Rīgas Lapa* translations of works by Ivan Turgenev (*Иван Тургенев*; 1818–1883) appeared for the first time – *Fragments from “Notes of a Hunter”*. The impact of Turgenev's original technique of nature description is present in Latvian realist writer Apsīšu Jēkabs' short stories where it helps the author “to reveal human characters, human feeling more profoundly” (Вавере, Матсков 1965: 95).

About that time texts by Leo Tolstoy (*Лев Толстой*; 1828–1910) started appearing in Latvian periodicals and reviews on the writer's work came out in book editions. The first translation of Tolstoy's text into Latvian known up to now, the adapted story “Power of Darkness” was published in 1885 in the periodical *Austrums*. In 1886 several translations of Tolstoy's texts were published in the major newspapers of that time – *Diena* and *Baltijas Vēstnesis*. However, the most essential line of Tolstoy's reception in Latvia is related to the so-called idea of ‘not resisting evil with violence’ that gained a wide resonance among Latvian authors (Jānis Poruks, Kārlis Skalbe, Augusts Saulietis).

First translations of the short prose fiction by Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Фёдор Достоевский*; 1821–1881) appeared in 1884 (story “The Funny Man's

Dream” in the paper *Tēvija*). Translations of his stories were published in the following years as well: in 1886 – “A Boy with Christ to Christmas Party” in *Austrums* and in 1890 when the monthly *Mājas Viesis* published his story *An Honest Thief* in Lapkalnu Andrejs’ translation etc. In 1894 Dostoevsky’s novel *The House of the Dead* was translated, in 1896 – the novel *Crime and Punishment* and *Poor Folk*, in 1897 – the novel *Humiliated and Insulted* and in 1898 – *Brothers Karamazov*. Ingrida Kiršentāle in her article *Dostojevskis un latviešu romāns* (Dostoevsky and Latvian novel) argues that Latvian writing has not bypassed this giant of Russian culture (Kiršentāle 1982: 86) by pointing out parallels between Dostoevsky’s novels and prose fiction by Jānis Poruks, Andrejs Upīts, Pāvils Rozītis, Kārlis Zariņš, Austra Ozoliņa-Krauze, Marģers Zariņš and other outstanding Latvian writers.

A great impact on the development of Latvian literature identity was had by the works of Anton Chekhov (*Антон Чехов*; 1860–1904). Translations of his stories appeared in Latvian press periodicals in 1890, when his story *Dreams* was reprinted from the paper *Novoje vremja* (1886) in journal *Austrums*. In Latvian the story was titled *Klaidonis* (Vagabond) and the translator signed his name as Markus. From 1893 to 1896 the number of Chekhov’s work publications oscillated between 1 to 7, but after 1897 it grew considerably. In 1901, 27 translations of Chekhov’s works were published, in 1903–52 translations, and in 1904 – 33 ones. This climax of Chekhov’s prose translation may be accounted for by the stable interest in realist literature in Latvia that was enhanced by the appearance of early modernist tradition. The reviews on Chekhov also grew in number, especially in the years of anniversaries of the writer’s biography (1904, 1910, 1914). However, already in the 1920s the popularity of Chekhov’s prose fiction diminished – the number of translations oscillated between 1 to 10, while in the 1930s – from 1 to 9 a year. Interest in staging of Chekhov’s plays was bigger in Riga Russian Theatre. Chekhov’s plays *Seagull* and *Uncle Vanya* were first staged in 1897. Later on the dynamic of staging was rather balanced – several times a year. The scope of staging grew wider before World War I. Possibly, at the initial stage of reception, like it was in the case of Strindberg, the small interest in Chekhov’s plays was explained by their subtle psychologism that was not easy to perceive by Latvian audiences.

In the development of Latvian literary modernism, great significance is attributed to the so-called Russian ‘Silver Age’ authors – Dmitriy Merezhkovsky (*Дмитрий Мережковский*; 1865–1941), Konstantin Bal’mont (*Константин Бальмонт*; 1867–1942), Valeriy Bryusov (*Валерий Брюсов*;

1873–1924), Fyodor Sologub (*Федор Сологуб*; 1863–1927) and others. According to Ludmila Sproģe and Vera Vāvere,

Russian symbolists entered Latvian literature at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the so-called decadence started forming in Latvia represented by a group of young Latvian writers gathered around Viktors Eglītis who were searching for new ways in art. Their views were turned towards Russian symbolists whose writing was at its peak of popularity, and intensive translation process started. (Sproģe, Vāvere 2002: 21)

The majority of 'Silver Age' authors' works were translated into Latvian between 1903 and 1915 owing to the initiative of individual Latvian writers and poets (Viktors Eglītis, Antons Austrīņš, Kārlis Krūza, Eduards Vulfs, etc.). Great significance in the formation of Latvian literary modernism is attributed to the contacts of Latvian early modernists with Russian 'Silver Age' poets: their personal correspondence, visits of Russian poets to Latvia as well as epigraphs, citations and imagery in Latvian modernist works borrowed from Russian symbolists and creatively transformed.

The impact of Slavic literature was also enhanced by the interest in Stanisław Przybyszewski's works. Being a Polish writer, his works were dominated by the features initiated by the age of modernity, and in the perception of Latvian writers and readers he was marked as a sign of Western culture.

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. (Kalnacs 2010: 217)

In conclusion, the impulses provided by German, Nordic, and Slavic vectors on the whole stimulated Latvian writers to step beyond the narrow borders of the national, rather peasant-like culture of that time and, due to poetic experiments produced under the influence of the translated authors, join the process of European and world literary development with their original works by trying out the opportunities opened by realist, naturalist, and modernist literary paradigms.

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