

20th-century Baltic Drama: Comparative Paradigms¹

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Abstract. The paper pays attention to the issues of commensurability in the development of 20th-century Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian literatures. It focuses upon thematic and aesthetic patterns of Baltic drama during this time period which is further subdivided into two parts, the first and the second half of the 20th century. The discussion about the genesis of Baltic drama during the late 19th, early 20th century is followed by an analysis of the impact of the nation states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania upon the institutionalization and development of drama and theatre during the 1920s and 1930s. Special attention is then paid to the notion of socialist realism as the ideological tool of Soviet influence in its most radical form imposed on the Baltic countries during the 1940s and 1950s. The return of realism in Baltic drama from the second half of the 1950s onwards as well as the impact of more contemporary literary trends such as existentialism and the theatre of the absurd present since the late 1960s are also addressed, and the paper briefly touches upon postmodernism and postdramatic theatre as experienced by Baltic cultures during the turn of the 21st century. Alongside similar patterns of development, aesthetic specificity of each particular culture observable during this time period is also discussed. In the final part of the paper, theoretical generalizations of the development of Baltic drama in the context of postcolonial criticism are provided.

Keywords: Estonian literature, Latvian literature, Lithuanian literature, Baltic drama, postcolonial criticism

This paper discusses the development of 20th-century Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian drama. My aim is to reveal specific thematic and aesthetic patterns that have been established during this time period, also pointing out social and political processes which had an impact on literary developments. We first discuss common trends in the development of Baltic drama and then proceed with an analysis of the differences caused by specific social milieus and aesthetic contexts.

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The beginnings of theatre and drama in the Baltic area are linked to travelling theatre companies and, later on, to established German theatres part of whose repertoire is also subsequently explored by vernacular theatre companies. The beginnings of Baltic (Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian) drama in the proper sense can be attributed to the second half of the 19th century when they coincide with the processes of national awakening characteristic of the whole of East-Central Europe. (Neubauer 2013: 12) Professionalization of theatre and drama stretches from the 1880s (in Latvia) until the 1920s (in Lithuania). There are substantial parallels to be observed along this chronologically not quite simultaneous road, however. If we link our observations of aesthetic trends to political and social contexts, the development of 20th-century Baltic drama can be subdivided into two periods, with major change provided by the political caesura of the Soviet occupation in 1940, followed by the Nazi regime, and then again by the Soviet occupation followed by colonial rule. (Annus 2012: 28–38)

1. The turn-of-the-century period

The first half of the 20th century can be characterized as a gradual transition from the ideals of national romanticism to alignment with the cultural context of Europe, placing individual personality at the centre of attention. During the early decades of the century, the national dimension was still present in the contemporary interpretation of folklore, national history, and myth which took centre stage. This often happened contemporaneously with adapting forms and patterns of early modernist drama in Europe. Let us take a closer look at this process.

The beginnings of Latvian, as well as Estonian theatre during the last three decades of the 19th century still reveal clear cut oppositions between native and foreign, and the characters of the plays embody manifestations of this underlying principle. Even if the dramatic models which the Latvian Ādolfs Alunāns (1828–1912) or the Estonian Lydia Koidula (1843–1886) use in their plays were based on German examples (e.g., the works of the prolific dramatist August von Kotzebue, 1761–1819), and while acting principles also were to a great extent borrowed from German companies, the message changed fundamentally. Alunāns' first one-act play, *Pašu audzināts* (*Self-tutored*) in 1869, still includes some satire on the overly high self-esteem of an uneducated country lad. Nevertheless, in the playwright's later works we trace a sharply marked contrast between the natives on the one hand and German landlords on the other. Alunāns' play *Kas tie tādi, kas dziedāja* (*Who Were They Who Sang*) written in

1888 and chronologically linked to the issues raised by the Third Nationwide Latvian Song Festival in 1888, an event of major social importance at that time and a tradition still being preserved as one of the principal festivities in today's Latvia, is a relevant example here.

Ādolfs Alunāns, the so-called father of Latvian theatre who initiated the creation of the first Latvian theatre company in 1870, locates the events of his 1888 play in a Latvian farmer's manor which is inhabited by idealized peasants, among them the main character of the play, the Latvian girl Skaidrite, and her loving father, Baltauns. The idyllic relationships are, however, disturbed as Skaidrite falls in love with the local landlord Conrad, who has returned to his manor after a prolonged stay abroad. Even though they are both fond of each other, the prejudices of the peasants as well as protests from the family of the landlord force the sacrificial suicide on the young girl. Upon her death, however, the landlord swears his unbroken determination to care about the future of the peasants, a sadly optimistic finale to a fairytale story. Deep fears regarding changes or, for that matter, dangerous misalliances that might disturb the societal order underline the reality of the world kept aloof from any moves which do not coincide with older traditions, thus marking a timeless society which tries to preserve traditional ways of life.

Quite on the contrary, in the literary work of Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1863–1908), one of the most important Latvian authors of the time period, and, more specifically, in his plays *Pazudušais dēls* (*The Prodigal Son*, 1893) and *Ugunī* (*In the Fire*, 1905), we face a completely different level of awareness of changing times which becomes substantial for the characters of this drama. The concreteness of space (a minutely observed Latvian peasant's and German landlord's manor, respectively) and time (the events of the latter play are explicitly marked by the author as taking place 'before the uprising') provide principal coordinates among which the characters are placed. Blaumanis plays which, on the one hand, are deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of the rural community, at the same time also manifest modernist literary qualities.

Concerning the generation of early 20th century Baltic authors, it would be fair to say that 'their cosmopolitan reading and writing habits afforded them the opportunity to appreciate how national and regional cultures could be grasped for their literariness as textual constructions.' (Aching 2012: 114)

How do we explain the reasons for this rapid change and can it be comparable to more general developments in the literary field?

In the context of the 'global turn' in comparative literature and modernist studies (Wollaeger 2012: 3), the turn-of-the-century period provides a good case to argue that the development of each particular society differs in its specific situation and the various phases of its own development. Such an

approach is vital for the appreciation of the complexity of interaction among different groups of society as well as for the placement of radical modernist aesthetic shifts alongside less visible, and sometimes more socially than aesthetically relevant decolonial moves. This paper thus engages with the specific temporality of a geographical and cultural locality where commensurability with modernist processes on a broader scale still needs to be figured out more comprehensively, but its presence is nevertheless not to be denied.

In her recent article 'World Modernisms, World Literature, and Comparativity', Susan Stanford Friedman asks the question, 'how has, or, for that matter how should, modernist studies participate in the shift in literary studies toward the planetary'. (Friedman 2012: 499) She distinguishes between two different models, a center/periphery model, based on the world-system theory initiated by Immanuel Wallerstein, and a circulation model based on theories of traveling cultures, transnational cultural traffic, and cultural hybridity (as seen in the works of James Clifford, Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, among others). My own approach is closer to the first of these models which treats the relations of core, periphery, and semi-periphery as a joint power-regulated system which provides the conditions for the inequality of development within the same historical period. This pattern has from the late 15th century onward also paved the way for the colonial matrix of power, colonizing not only space but also time of different cultures. In the words of Walter Mignolo, the master narrative of Western modernity has been supported by the ideology of salvation (historically) or development (a notion still topical in the 21st century). (Mignolo 2011: xxiv–xxv)

Social conditions have varied greatly around the globe, with societies moving at different speeds, experiencing ruptures and disjunctures in the process of transition. My argument in this paper is based on an assumption that, under the conditions of life characteristic of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Baltic societies, manifestations of modern literature might have been much more modest in terms of aesthetic radicalism while, at the same time, still introducing the modernist paradigm. Another point is that modernist works in the Baltic countries have deep social undertones often incommensurable with politically and socially more developed European cultures.

One possible point of reference on the continental scale is provided by the development of Scandinavian modernism which similarly was at an early stage initiated by radical social involvements and then stretched its influence deep into the 20th century and into the cultures across the Baltic Sea. Anna Westerståhl Stenport writes in a recent article that 'Modernism in Scandinavia emerges both early and late, through starts and stops, in intermittent and localized forms, as well as in tension with ideologies of margin and center, import

and export, and nation and cosmopolitanism'. (Westerståhl Stenport 2012: 479) Critics have also paid detailed attention to the motivating force of Georg Brandes's socially charged criticism which inspired the rise of literature of the so-called modern breakthrough in Scandinavian countries from the 1870s onwards. The seeming backwardness of development has contributed to the social radicalism of literature.

A similar claim concerning the absence of involvement of writers in social issues has been strongly put forward in late 19th century Latvia by literary critic Janis Jansons-Brauns. In his paper, 'Thoughts on Contemporary Latvian Literature', published in the early 1890s, Jansons sharply criticized what he found sentimental and out-of-date in Latvian letters. The date of this publication almost coincides with the famous lectures by the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun where the latter opposed contemporary psychological representations and advocated scrupulous attention with which writers should approach 'the unconscious life of the soul' (Hamsun 1970: 141), already indicating a different level of development in Scandinavian literatures. Jansons is quite far away from such aesthetic sensibility, and he also mixes up the denial of sentimental idealism, on the one hand, with a request for social reforms which is based on similar, even if more socially oriented idealism, on the other.

At the same time, however, Jansons' influential voice is timely, and it is also indirectly echoed in the idea of the unbridgeable gap between idealism and modernism as the most important juxtaposition in 19th-century literature, forcefully proposed by Toril Moi in her book length study of Henrik Ibsen's drama published in 2006. (Moi 2006) Such a perspective seems to be relevant to the discussion of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Baltic literatures, which were paving their way from folkloristic traditions towards representation of the conditions of modern society and daily life, from literature dealing with patriotic sentiment towards texts which incorporate individual experience and up-to-date aesthetic visions.²

Let us look at another pair of opposites in Latvian turn-of-the-twentieth-century literature, where we encounter a similar juxtaposition as provided by the previous example, even if the scale of conflicts is wider and, in the latter work, there are even broader philosophical implications.

Lāčplēsis (or *Bearslayer*, published 1888), one of the foundational texts of the Latvian nation, is an epic poem created by an individual author, the national

² In my approach, I rely on Moi's ideas to a great extent; I also involve observations made by David Krasner in a recent book on the history of modern drama, where he sees the development of 19th-century romanticism, realism, and later avant-garde as substantial parts in the same general move toward the radicalization of literature (Krasner 2012).

romantic poet Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902). The poem juxtaposes two different time periods by involving memories of the timeless happy childhood of the nation, interrupted by foreign invasion and settlement. The narrative implies that the time has come to recover the lost values. The national hero, Lāčplēsis, is confronted with the alien figure of the Dark Crusader; Lāčplēsis is also opposed by the traitor Kangars, but supported by the virtuous Laimdota. One of the figures of the poem, the beautiful Spīdala, is converted from being a witch to helping the progressive cause of national awakening. The poem expresses the hope that the hero, who at the end of the poem together with his opponent drowns in the river Daugava, will rise again to help the nation regain its lost freedom and link its past and future into an organic whole, an idea characteristic of the understanding of nation in 19th-century literature. As Vaira Viķe-Freiberga comments,

[t]he poem offers ideals that are necessary both on a personal level and also in nation building. The maturing of both personality and nation should not be seen as an end in itself. It is, rather, part of a bigger picture, the three components of which – the individual, the nation and humankind as a whole – are equally important. Generally speaking, Pumpurs succeeded in attaining his objectives because they reflected the hopes and fears of his epoch. (Viķe-Freiberga 2007: 302)

The text also alludes to the 19th-century belief that an epic is crucial proof of the historical self-dependence of a nation. Being without an epic for 19th-century nations meant existing without history, notes Thomas Taterka (2010: 72).

The same plot is utilized in a completely different fashion less than two decades later, in 1905, when it becomes the basis for the Latvian modernist poet's and playwright's Rainis's (1865–1929) symbolist drama *Uguns un nakts* (*Fire and Night*, 1905) which marks a breakthrough in the representation of the rising Latvian nation, the impact strengthened by the play's first highly popular stage production in 1911. Keeping the basic confrontation characteristic of Pumpurs's epic, namely that between Lāčplēsis and the Dark Crusader, intact, Rainis completely changes the image of one of the protagonists, now renamed Spīdola. This character stands for the embodiment of an idea of perpetual development and change thus also providing a new motivation for the hero after he has reached his initial goals of (temporarily) freeing his native land. The process of change now becomes even more crucial than the attainment of a particular goal, thus also reflecting upon the rapid transformations within society.

Instead of accentuating the story line which mostly follows the plot already provided by Pumpurs, Rainis's focus is on different stages of the historical transformation of Latvian society. Each act marks a crucial step along this

way, thus also fragmenting the narrative into a collage of episodes taking place at different times and locations. The patriotic task of the hero is matched by his desire for personal experience, and the clash between these two drives is marked by deep inner conflicts. Besides political and social issues, Rainis's play thus also provides an implicit discussion on the role of art in the shaping of human personality. One of the characters of the drama, Spīdola, constantly promotes striving towards the realm of absolute beauty, the imagery clearly pointing toward individual self-fulfillment, traditionally appreciated by modernist literary and art criticism.

There is also another facet that adds to the complexity of the relationship between the self and the 'other'. About the same time as Rainis's play is written – around 1905 – a new generation of writers entered the literary scene; their main interest was no longer turned toward social problems. Individual experience became the focus of dramatic works of such Latvian writers as Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962), Edvards Vulfs (1886–1919), the Estonians August Kitzberg (1855–1927), Eduard Vilde (1865–1933), and others. The figure of the artist is now the 'self' confronted by the surrounding society that does not match the needs and expectations of the creative spirits, irrespective of their national affinities. Refinement of the soul becomes a constant topic in plays that also often deal with oversensitive and weak characters, consciously determined to live on the fringes of established society.

During the turn-of-the-century period there thus appeared a noticeable (if not unbridgeable) watershed between socially (or nationally) and individually oriented authors. In the second decade of the 20th century, we also notice a substantial increase of philosophical reflection. Among the most well-known examples of this kind of drama are Rainis's tragedy *Jāzeps un viņa brāļi* (*Joseph and his Brothers*, 1919) and the play by the Estonian author, Anton Hansen Tammsaare (1878–1940), *Juudit* (*Judith*, 1921).

2. The period of independence

The proclamation of the independent states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia in 1918 significantly changed the status of national theatre and drama. Institutionalization of theatre processes followed, and theatres were ascribed the task of delving into specific aspects of the lives of the local communities. These trends evolved during the 1920s and an example can be provided here using developments in the theatre life of Latvia.

The opening of the Latvian National Theatre in November, 1919, was marked by the production of a play of leading turn-of-the-century Latvian author, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, *In the Fire*. In 1921, another famous Latvian poet,

Rainis, undertook the management of the theatre which he continued till 1925. Along with the production of original plays, this period was characterized by an attempt to put special emphasis on the production of drama of classical antiquity (which had also played a formative role in the aesthetic development of Rainis's aesthetic views). Economically, however, this policy did not prove to be viable. In a parallel move, a new theatre company, Daile (Arts) Theatre was established in 1920 under the leadership of the young director Eduards Smiļģis (1886–1966) who was to become one of the most important personalities in Latvian theatre life (and who continued to work with the company almost till his death in 1966). This company devoted the early 1920s to theatrical experiments which brought it to the attention of both critics and public, and, in addition, twenty of the theatre's stage designs were awarded the Grand Prix at the Paris International Exhibition in 1925, being highly praised, among others, by one of the founders of French modernist theatre, André Antoine. (Dzene, Zeltiņa 2012: 56) After the mid-1920s, however, while continuing with an innovative approach to theatre production, close co-operation between the theatre and the poet was announced as one of the main tasks in the company's aesthetic declaration. The speech consultant took his place alongside the set designer, the movement consultant and the music consultant in the team overlooked by Smiļģis's directorial powers. (Dzene, Zeltiņa 2012: 57) So it happened that starting from the second half of the 1920s, Latvian drama texts acquired an even greater importance in the staging practices of both major theatre companies. In this process special attention was paid to the truthful and realistic interpretation of living conditions of the local populace. The return to realism was the main trend of the late 1920s and 1930s which took the place of drama with mythological and folklore elements, characteristic of the turn-of-the-century period. Estonian scholars dealing with the development of theatre and drama have detected the same trend as in Latvia, the way paved especially by the popular productions of Hugo Raudsepp's (1883–1952) plays, following in the footsteps of the exceptionally popular *Mikumārdis* (*Mikumārdis Farm*) in 1929. In Lithuania, a somewhat similar role was played by the works of the prolific dramatist Petras Vaičiūnas (1890–1959).

To a great extent after the end of World War II Baltic drama in exile reflected the trends of realist drama of the interwar period and dealt with the experience of Baltic communities in the countries of new settlement. 'The main objective of the exile culture was considered to be the integration of the nation and national self-preservation', according to Estonian researcher Piret Kruuspere (2008: 790). To a great extent, creation of new drama texts in exile can be linked to the notion of consumer plays (ib. 797). Apart from this general tendency, tentative attempts of dramaturgy which mirrored new trends of the

Baltic drama of the late 1930s (plays by the Estonian author Anton Hansen Tammsaare and the Lithuanian, Kazis Biņķis [1893–1942], among others) as well as post-war European drama experiments, such as existentialism and absurd, were also noticeable.

3. Soviet occupation and the model of socialist realism

The majority of plays written during the second half of the 20th century, which marks the second major period in the development of Baltic drama, are directly linked to the processes of Soviet occupation and colonization; clear indications of what was to follow were present already during the 1940–1941 when all aspects of cultural life of the occupied Baltic countries were controlled by Soviet political and cultural emissaries. For example, any decisions made by the rector of the Latvian Academy of Music, the famous composer Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948) who was grudgingly allowed to continue in this post, were controlled by a half-educated Soviet ideological representative, Žanis Gruntāls. In his memoirs, Vītols, who was more than eighty years old upon leaving Latvia in 1944, admitted that one of the reasons for his choice to go into exile (the fate which he shared with about 200,000 Latvians and 70,000 Estonians) was provided by the unwillingness of the refugees to once again be ordered about by culturally uneducated persons (Klotiņš 2011: 161). Accordingly, the first post-war decade from approximately 1944 to 1955 was dominated by the overwhelming ideological and aesthetic impact of the so-called socialist realism. During this period literature in the Baltic countries ‘gradually merged with Soviet literature [...] literary works became uniform and their authors lost their unique individuality’ (Briedis 2008: 32).

In order to grasp the consequences of this process, we have to analyze the development of Soviet literature under the superimposed ideological constraints.

From the beginning of the 1930s, the political practice of the Soviet Union was to apply a unified dogma to all forms of ideological discourse.³ During the initial years economic problems in the Soviet Union were acute, but gradually the resolution of ideological questions came to be seen as a more significant prerequisite for achieving declared political goals. The turning point for literature

³ ‘A circumstance of the power of totalitarian states is that it creates an isolated social system, like an aquarium in which people move about like goldfish. In this space, everything is organized so that the aquarium seems to be the entire world. Any expression of existence – newspapers, radio, books, art, science, daily life and holidays – seems to confirm a unified and unshakable party doctrine.’ (Rühle 1988: 167)

was the disbanding of alternative writers' organizations and the forced unification of all authors under the banner of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932. And so, just as it had happened with other arts, the aesthetic diversity of the 1920s was restricted, in fact suspended, by means of administrative practices. The next step in the process of centralization was related to the public declaration of the doctrine of socialist realism, which took place at the first Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. The new doctrine was expressed in rather abstract terms using ideas taken from the 19th-century Russian revolutionary democrats, including phrases about the 'partisanship' of literature and its 'development in the direction of progress', as well as the need to (re)create 'positive heroes'. However, a rigorous theoretical basis was not founded. As a result, it was not uncommon that one and the same text was interpreted in various ways. During the Stalin years this often meant the unilateral expression of partiality and caprice of a higher statesman and the associated arbitrary decisions this brought about.

Correspondingly, in the practice of writing and its control the tendency was to allow a limited number of themes and a narrow range of modes of artistic expression in the artist's toolbox.⁴ The dominating feature in the evaluation of works of art was their conformity to the principles of socialist ideology. This kind of censorship became more and more stringent. For example, toward the end of the 1940s, political decisions turned against specific works of art when they were targeted as exemplifying cultural tendencies unfavorable to the Soviet social order.

In a historical retrospective of the various theories about socialist realism and their practical application in the Soviet Union, we can identify five separate levels of activity. (1) Before the declaration of the new doctrine at the start of the 1930s, in order to maintain at least partially the illusion of the continuation of the literary processes, we have the so-called *precanonisation period*; this includes works from the first decades of the 20th century, which were only indirectly associated with the historical development goals of society that were formulated later, but were still usable for justifying the necessity of social

⁴ In her research in *The Mythology of Sovietland*, Elita Ansonė mentions the fact that a list of themes and plots prepared in 1941 can be found in the Latvian State Archive. It is clear that the list is directly translated from Russian and that probably such a list was sent to all of the annexed Baltic countries. The document does not contain a single word about the form of art. One hundred and twenty events from the Bolshevik revolution are listed – themes and about 200 specific scenes that the artist should make use of. (Ansonė 2008: 19) Testifying to the durability of the ideological and territorial claims, one of the many themes mentioned is 'the final consolidation of the *kolhoz* apparatus in the village', which could be used with the scene 'the chairman of the collective farm adopts a statement about the use of village land for all time' (Ansonė 2008: 32).

revolution and the seemingly objective explanation of its prerequisite circumstances. (2) The *canonisation period* pertains to the early 1930s, which also includes the formulation of the theoretical positions. (3) The next period, the *implementation of the theoretical positions of the canon*, lasts for about ten years. This is characterized by the narrowing of the boundaries of what is allowed and then the subsequent expansion of those boundaries, not changing the principal ideas of those tenets. (4) *Overcoming the canon*: these early attempts are correlated with the death of the country's political leader, Joseph Stalin, and the unmasking of his cult of personality in the mid-1950s. (5) In the *decanonisation period*, starting in the 1970s, it is possible to talk about literary works that exist alongside those that are part of the canon, but are only indirectly associated with the canon and actually only reflect the influence of the canon on literature and society. (Günter 2000: 281–282)

The origins of the socialist realist doctrine and the implementation of censorship are to be found in the political and cultural processes taking place in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s and, as previously mentioned, an intensification of ideological dogma can be observed in the latter half of the 1940s. This particular historical development aggravated the crisis of intellectual life as theories were subordinated to the needs of the occupation during the course of the Second World War. After the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States in 1940, alongside the goal of the destruction of the immediately preceding political and economic system, an intensified ideological pressure existed that made following the current demands of the Communist Party unavoidable. Simultaneously it was necessary for artists to subordinate themselves to the mechanisms that had already been established in the Soviet Union during the previous two decades.

Following the example of the imperial centre, the administrators of the outlying regions also created repressive institutions of control, subjecting earlier publications to mass destruction and replacing them with new editions created in compliance with Soviet ideology, while carrying out ideological attacks against new works of art and their authors.

The rapid and radical implementation of the dogma of socialist realism in the Baltic States points to one of the most important principles of colonization – subordinate nations are robbed of their rights not only to their present, but also to their past. For Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians, Soviet ideology forced the forgetting of the past and encouraged its rewriting (Loomba 2005: 24). In literature this principle was accomplished through forcing the majority of texts out of cultural circulation. This was particularly tragic because national development was cut off just at the moment when the Baltic States had gained political consciousness, economic stability, and an independent historical view

had coalesced in literature and culture. The goal of the colonial power was to rob the individual of his feeling of personal freedom and the national self-assurance so closely related to it.

Furthermore, expressions of creative freedom were almost entirely extinguished by certain formulas established in the social consciousness and aimed at the intelligentsia such as 'wheel' and 'screw' (Lenin) and 'the engineers of people's souls' (Stalin). Such ideas are directly related to the strategies of other colonial regimes. As Aimé Césaire has formulated, in the subjugated territories colonial power equates a person with a thing, whose most important function is to serve the empire in attaining its goals.⁵

As the new ideological canon was implemented, entirely different rules of the game were forced upon culture. Furthermore, for the first half of the twentieth century Baltic literatures had been involved in a process of self-inquiry through dialogue with the Western tradition; now they found themselves caught between two global opposites – capitalism and socialism, or Western and Eastern society. Now all they could do was to allow themselves to be subjugated to the new Eastern imperial principles; there was no alternative.

Taking into consideration the fact that most of the writers in the Baltic States had fled their countries and become refugees during the Second World War, those authors who stayed behind were forced to allow their work to be co-opted for imperial propaganda and they were especially supported by the Soviet Union.⁶ In this way another principle of colonialism was realized – the local society was divided and special privileges were given to the supporters of the empire. Furthermore, in trying to secure ideological influence and gain loyalty the Soviet regime saw the intelligentsia as one of the potentially privileged parts of society and, as such, subject to demands of collaboration both directly and indirectly.⁷

The political, territorial, economic and ideological consequences of the Soviet occupation and colonization of the Baltic countries are comparable to the governance methods of other colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. The greatest difference of Soviet colonialism was the fact that the ideological discourse was expressed in a particularly bold dogmatic form

⁵ As Ania Loomba points out, the principle of equating people with things is discussed in Aimé Césaire's 1950 essay, *Discourse on colonialism* (Loomba 2005: 22).

⁶ It is significant that in all of the puppet governments established in the Baltic countries in 1940, representatives of the intelligentsia were provided a visible place.

⁷ The Italian theoretician Antonio Gramsci states that colonial power or hegemony is established combining the principles of cooperation between ideology and power (Loomba 2005: 31).

that was institutionalized after the takeover of political power. This introduced additional obstacles and barriers for the newly colonized Baltic people, and a refusal to comply meant a very real threat to any individual's physical existence.

The goal of the socialist realist canon was to create barriers that isolate literature from the flow of activities changing over time, and then to direct it into a particular course of development, emphasizing the meaning of certain elements and changing the impact of others. This mostly pertains to that phase of socialist realism that lasted through the mid-1950s.

When comparing the dramatic works that appeared in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the first decade after the war, the ideological positions and structural models of the plays are surprisingly similar. These texts serve as proof of the dominating principles that were politically forced upon the literatures and they reflect a polarized social reality in which there is always only one right answer: the Soviet way of interpreting historical development separates people into right and wrong positions. It is impossible to escape this process, since each and every one must make a choice at a historical watershed.

Let us take a closer look at one example, the Estonian writer August Jakobson's (1904–1963) play, *Elu tsitadellis* (*Life in the Citadel*, 1946), where the ideological message is expressed through the portrayal of its central hero, language professor Miilas. The Second World War is coming to a close (the play is set in an Estonian town from September to December, 1944), and professor Miilas tries to live and work as if the events taking place in the world around him had no bearing on him personally. The author of the play deemed that this cannot be so; a harsh reality is set against the professor's excitement over the success of his translation of *The Odyssey*, and the seemingly idyllic milieu is destroyed as the professor's son from his first marriage, Ralf, and his nephew, Richard, return to the house of Miilas. It gradually turns out that Ralf has been the leader of a Nazi concentration camp, and Richard – a doctor. At the end of the play both men are denounced and arrested.

The enemies of the Soviet state are characterized as entirely negative persons; as Andres Jüriado points out, this changes the genre from drama into melodrama, as the crass opposition between the protagonists reveals (Jüriado 1973: 32–33). The professor's son, Ralf, in the negative characters' camp earns appropriate critical judgments in the press of the day: 'That is an animal in human form [...]. With unrelenting artistic consequence, the playwright shows that Ralf is merely the servant of his lowest instincts.' (Lācis 1951: 468)

The positive example in this play is the Soviet officer, Ants Kuslap, who opens new educational opportunities for the professor's daughter, Lydia, at Tartu University. And, in his turn, at the end of the play Miilas receives a lesson from the newspaper editor and former guerrilla soldier, Jaan Sander:

[W]hen a person sinks into his so-called indifference, separateness, apolitical stance, which means pulling away from and isolating himself from society and its tasks, then this person is not yet entirely dead to society. Quite the opposite, he is actively fighting against progress, against development [...]. You saw how these poisonous snakes crept into your fortress. They slid over your high wall, into the very centre, sending a Trojan horse through your narrow gate in the form of your own son. (Pause.) If Major Kuslap had not discovered the signs of these poisonous snakes, they would have caught you all in their constricting loops [...]. No deed, Comrade Professor, need be done simply for its own sake, but for the sake of the happiness of the people. We must love the people with all our hearts, and with every deed we must fight for their well-being. We may not distance ourselves from the people through our work and escape to the so-called citadel.⁸ (Jakobsons 1947: 127–128)

One of the problems that arises in the interpretation of Jakobson's work is the fact that the conflict takes place within one family. However, having ascertained that this is so, new ways were found to interpret the traditional form, subjugating it to the reflection of the new, victorious reality. The Latvian stage director Anna Lācis (1891–1979) wrote:

[A]s opposed to bourgeois dramaturgy that portrays a family falling apart, the Soviet playwright shows its recovery to health, as it purifies itself from abscesses. And so the family drama is filled with fundamentally new content, the family conflict is transformed into an artistic device and becomes a basic element of the work. (Lācis 1951: 471)

This evaluation also contains the principle of self and other that is woven throughout socialist realist literature. As the cultures of the Baltic nations were confronted with the ideologically correct Soviet socialist world, the former self belonging to the nation automatically became the 'other' – that which was different. Compliance with the new reality could be verified by showing one's full-fledged transformation into a member of the new society through specific action, and by isolating oneself from those who did not belong to the transformed reality.

In order to clarify my arguments, I here lay out the main principles of socialist realism that are emphasized in the plays written during the period under consideration, ones which reflect the ideologically indisputable dominants of the process of the canonization of literature: (1) the texts are dominated by hyperrealism as an imagined reflection of the revolutionary

⁸ Quotes from Latvian sources translated by the author of the article.

transformation of reality in its so-called objective historical development;⁹ (2) the portrayal of globalised antagonistic opposition and, with that, the polarization of the valuable and the worthless is accented (Günter 2000: 9); (3) social priorities take precedence over personal issues, monumentality and heroics are emphasized as the characteristics needed by the creators of a new life; (4) the acceptance of the new reality is declared to be a prerequisite for existence. The need to fit into the new way of life is an obligatory choice, the only alternative to which is a tragic outcome and death.

In the Baltic States, occupied and colonized by the Soviet Union, this threat was visited upon thousands of individuals and also threatened the historical existence of the nations involved. One of the methods of national conservation was anticolonial opposition, which for decades appeared mainly in the form of intellectual protest. These processes are reflected in the gradual transformation of the socialist realist canon in art and literature, which became possible from the mid-1950s after the death of Stalin.

4. The transformation of the canon

From the second half of the 1950s onwards, a gradual return to aesthetic standards started to appear, and in this process we can distinguish two trends which determine literary developments which lasted into the 1980s. The first of these trends dominates the period from the mid-1950s till the late 1960s, marking an initial stage in the process of the overcoming of socialist realism's ideological canon. The most characteristic feature of this phase of development is marked by the return to more realistic depiction of contemporary realities which under the circumstances acquired features of ideological protest noticeable, among others, in the works of the Estonian author Juhan Smuul (1922–1971) and the Latvian, Gunārs Priede (1928–2000). For example, Priede, one of the leading dramatists of this time period, made a strong case for the representation of contemporary reality both in his plays as well as in articles published in the press. One of his main points was that the depiction of historical events is made much easier by the possibility to present clearly cut antagonists whose role has been determined by the dialectic development of society (the would-be Marxist terms of this way of reasoning also include latent criticism of the primitive interpretation of historical realities characteristic of Soviet ideology). Priede emphasizes how much more difficult – and at the same time more attractive

⁹ As Hans Günter emphasizes, hyperrealism meant a different, unrealistic artistic form of ignorance, becoming 'mythology clothed in realism' (Günter 2000: 10).

both for the audiences and the author – is the depiction of contemporary reality where individual decisions of different human characters reveal history in the making. (Priede 2013: 760–763) This position is principally different from the turn-of-the-century attempts by leading writers to discover the historical roots of national identity, thus following patterns of thought established by Enlightenment thinkers.

The reappearance of historical motives might at the same time be seen as the reverse side of the same process in the return to reality principle.

The play *Herkus Mantas* by Lithuanian dramatist Juozas Grušas (1901–1986) is one of the most important examples of how in this time period history and memory return to the foreground in cultural life in general and in literature in particular. In this play the author pays special attention to historical events as a source of national memory. He thus links the drama of the 1950s to the tradition of historical dramaturgy in Lithuania and Latvia. Works by Vydūnas (1868–1953), Vincas Krėvė (1882–1954), Balys Sruoga (1896–1947), and Rainis come to mind here due to the richness in the portrayal of the main characters as well as due to the use of typical models of relationships serving as a mirror for basic human values. For example, as in Rainis's tragedy, *Indulis un Ārija* (*Indulis and Ārija*, 1911), Grušas's work tells a story which includes a loving couple belonging to different nations and cultures, an old chieftain who totally distrusts the enemy, a traitor, an inwardly undivided young hero, and two types of the enemy – the honest one and the deceitful one. To some extent the stable ethical principles portrayed serve as a guarantee for taking past experience into account in contemporary society.

In comparison to the topicality of plays by Smuul and Priede, Grušas broadens the individual's responsibility and links it with the accountability for the nation's destiny through the prism of historical perspective. The general scheme of his five-act tragedy is apparently simple. *Herkus Mantas*, the leader of the Prussian nation, who, having spent a long time in the land of his enemies, the Germans, has adopted the foreign faith, Christianity, and fallen in love with a German girl, Kristina, is torn between two opposing forces on his return home. On the one hand, the ideals of national freedom and independence guide his steps; on the other hand, his experience in foreign parts has also created an understanding and respect for different principles of life, thus making the apparently inescapable blind cruelty in this fight much more difficult to bear. When *Herkus Mantas* has to make his decision as to whether the captured knights should be sacrificed to the gods, he is held back not only by Kristina's plea for mercy, not only by the fact that he has a close friend among the captives, but also because he is asking himself an existential question – is it possible to bring about the hoped-for national independence by means of cruelty? *Herkus*

Mantas as depicted by Grušas is much more homogeneous and sure of his actions than Skirgaila in Vincas Krėvė's *Skirgaila* (1922) or Jogaila in Balys Sruoga's *Milžino paunksmė* (*In the Shadow of the Giant*, 1932) and yet he, too, must ask himself the question whether the price that the nation must pay for its liberty is worth it. In Grušas's 1957 play, despite the love between Herkus and Kristina, the hero has no higher goal than the fight for the happiness of his own people, yet the dramatic action reveals precisely how difficult and contradictory the way to this goal may become.

From the late 1960s onwards the importance of realism diminishes while closer links with the aesthetic developments of European literatures motivate the appearance of new artistic ideas; for example, the introduction of elements of the theatre of the absurd. Literature of the 1970s and the 1980s tried to be different, looking for the revival of the modernist poetics including such poetic devices as irony, grotesque, ambiguity, subjectivity and others. Finding the way for a work of art to reach wider audience was, however, complicated not only by the still active bureaucracy, but also by the attitude of the audience itself, whose experience during the preceding decades was entirely limited to realist art.

It seems that the years 1968 and 1969 marked a substantial turning point in the context of Baltic drama. The turn was most clearly expressed in the production of the Estonian author Paul-Eerik Rummo's (b. 1942) play *Tuhkatriinumäng* (*Cinderellagame*, 1969). It marked a radical break with the tradition of realism; a break which, according to the theatre historian Jaak Rähesoo, 'found its expression in the freedom with which the play texts were often treated, in the aggressiveness and physicality of stage action, and in heavy reliance on symbols and metaphors'. (Rähesoo 2007: 248) It is, however, also worth remembering the other side of this event, namely, the reluctance of the general public (including many people from theatre circles) to accept new means of artistic expression despite a widespread dissatisfaction with the dominating social conditions. Instead of open-mindedness towards new challenges, we notice here the strong impact of the established aesthetic norms of realist thinking which under Soviet conditions were unquestionably linked to the socialist realist canon.

The colonization of minds which had thus been taking place during the preceding decades had also to be taken into account by authors who found themselves constrained between the desire for new artistic means on the one hand, and expectations of the public on the other. This duality expressed itself in what – in Homi Bhabha's terms – we might call mimicry; an imitation of the established models while at the same time attempting to give the traditional structures a new meaning.

The social contexts provide one of the explanations for the attempts at creative restoration of historically relevant topics of the early 20th century Baltic literatures – myth, folklore, and history. The revival of national myths, which becomes one of the features of the drama of the 1970s and 1980s, is thus also reminiscent of the early days of national literatures in the Baltic countries.¹⁰

The above observations reveal common patterns in the development of the 20th-century Baltic literatures also providing a link with historical realities. The turn of the 21st century confirms parallels among Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian drama and theatre processes where the impact of postmodern experiments, and – in the early 21st century – also those of postdramatic theatre, which has become a keyword in the description of theatre and drama trends, can be seen as dominating the field. (Zeltiņa, Reinsone 2013)

5. Cultural differences and postcolonial contexts of the 20th-century Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian drama

The history of Baltic drama is also marked by specific features of each particular culture. The following points can be made concerning differences in the development of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian culture: (a) due to the ban on Lithuanian letters (1864–1904) the development of theatre and drama in Lithuania was delayed. While early national theatre developments in Estonia and Latvia can be observed from the 1870s onwards, and permanent theatre companies became established in Riga, Tartu, and Tallinn, in Lithuania during the late 19th century only sporadic theatre productions were possible. The so-called secret Lithuanian evenings since the mid-1880s, however, became one of the forums for the expression of national protest even if their artistic quality was rather low (Aleksaitė 2002: 186); (b) the topic of history, while relevant for all Baltic cultures, has been especially important in Lithuanian letters. The romantic images of early texts have gradually been replaced by more sober observations. Characteristically enough, during the independence period of the 1920s and 1930s, plays on historical themes by Vincas Krėvė and Balys Sruoga portray rather contradictory feelings embodied by the characters taken from medieval Lithuanian history, thus reflecting the much more modest size of the Lithuanian state compared to earlier times. During the Soviet period, history

¹⁰ Similar processes took place in the development of the Baltic theatre, as is shown by Piret Kruuspere in her research on Estonian memory theatre, for example, in the discussion of the work of the stage director Merle Karusoo who continues the processes of ‘cultivating, and stabilizing, national memory and identity’ (Kruuspere 2002: 276).

provides a point of reference for the contemporary situation in Lithuania both in terms of stressing the national confidence of individual struggles as in the plays by Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930–2011), or rather demonstrating the often tragic outcome of the attempts to achieve one's true aims in the works of Juozas Grušas; (c) the impact of the theatre of the absurd is more present in the works of Estonian (Paul-Eerik Rummo) and Lithuanian (Kazys Saja [b. 1932]) dramatists, and there are only much more modest and belated responses by Latvian authors (Lelde Stumbre [b. 1952]), a fact which can possibly be explained by the closer ties of Lithuanian and Estonian societies to Central European (Polish) and Western (Finnish) literary examples; (d) Latvian culture of the 1970s and especially 1980s is to a large extent dominated by the reappearance of folkloric ideas as a means to express the feelings of national identity; (e) in the late 20th century, postmodern experiments have been more present in Estonian and Lithuanian drama.

Analysis of the development of 20th-century drama in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania reveals that within political and social developments there is a certain pattern relevant for all three cultures. This means that to a considerable extent this development has been determined by historical circumstances also linked to global political trends, and an important factor has been the imperial presence of Russia and (later) the Soviet Union in the region. From this point of view, the development of 20th century Baltic drama can be described in terms of colonial difference as well as anti-colonial protest which form part of the 20th and 21st centuries global decoloniality. In this process, we can distinguish at least six different manifestations of decolonial thinking in Baltic drama: (a) the national, expressing the particularity of each of the Baltic cultures, (b) the philosophical, putting national experience in the context of more global trends of thought, (c) the historical, which has manifested itself as a tendency towards the preservation of established values at crucial periods of political and social changes, (d) the contemporary, which has provided both a close observation of daily life in local community as well as a return to more realistic portrayals of day-to-day circumstances as a denial of abstract dogmas of socialist realism, (e) the absurd, which included the possibility of hidden social protest, and (f) the postcolonial, which has served the expression of post-independence feelings in the Baltic countries at the turn of the 21st century and to a certain extent provided a synthesis of previous trends in drama. The early 21st century reality is seen by Baltic theatre and drama through the lens of new aesthetic trends (postmodernism and postdramatic theatre) thus responding to postcolonial and neocolonial features of the contemporary globalized world.

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