

Latvian Literature and National Identity: An Introduction

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In 2018, Latvia was celebrating its centenary. During its centenary year, Latvia was seriously re-evaluating its national history, cultural heritage, folklore heritage, and national literature. Since the time it has become an independent state, there have been many different historical-cultural events that have influenced not only Latvia's path after the establishment of Latvia's statehood, but the development of Latvian literature as well. Although the country of the population little less than 2 million and constituting 0.03% of the world share, as well as of the land area of 62,200 square km (*Countries ...*) seems small and young to big nations, the Latvian culture and literature have produced striking, though still little known in the world, cultural and literary values.

American literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels states that literature is a part of culture (Michaels). In turn, the explorer of Latvian literature and theatre, academician Viktors Hausmanis has pointed out that "literature is one of the ways for the manifestation of our nation's existence, testimony to our identity. We, the Latvians, have our own distinctive language, our own history, folklore and literature, and all these forms of expression taken together attest us as a peculiar formation within the community of European nations. Literature is not merely the matter for reading, but rather the reflection of our soul, of our nature" (Hausmanis). At evaluating the Latvian literature in the context of national identity, we could add that it does not only reflect the national identity, but also actively creates it. The centenary of Latvian state has activated the attempts to understand and define national identity, looking back on the past and assessing different stages of Latvian history anew. Ilze Kacane and Alina Romanovska maintain that "the issue of national identity is currently brought into focus by the fact that due to various historical developments the proportion of representatives of other nationalities in Latvia now is quite considerable, and this situation is being constantly aggravated both socially and politically"

(Kacane, Romanovska 224). The issue of national identity is topical in the aspect of literature and culture, as well as of policy and state security.

The history of Latvian literature is tightly linked with the history of Latvia and with the major periods of national identity development. The review of the history of Latvian literature in the context of the major events of Latvian history opens up new opportunities for defining and analysing national identity.

The early beginnings of Latvian literature are to be looked for in the sixteenth century when the first texts in Latvian were written, which were not of a poetic, but religious, didactic and practical nature. These texts were adapted translations from German. The creators of first Latvian texts were mainly German priests who had the need to successfully communicate with Latvian peasants when the German interests had to be defended on this territory. The reasons for the above described situation have to be looked for in the historical conditions of that time, namely, various other nations (the Germans, Swedes, Poles, Russians) had ruled over the territory of Latvia. Guntis Berelis says that “until the beginning of the nineteenth century the Latvians were predominantly serfs who did not have the slightest notion of the heights of German culture and who, in addition, were quite sceptical about the Christian faith. The Latvians did not have their own intelligentsia — and there was no opportunity for it to arise” (Berelis 14). However, it should be noted that on a primary level Latvian peasants were among the most educated people in Europe, thus, for instance, in 1897 the literacy in Vidzeme reached 94.6%. But to receive a higher level education in Latvia was impossible, since even the first Latvian elementary school in Riga was opened only in 1881. The language dominating in a higher level education was German for a long time (except in Latgale), and the civil service of the Russian Empire, in its turn, forced the Russian language on education of all levels” (*Ieskats Latvijās ...*).

The development of Latvian literature and culture was hindered also by the fact that the value of folk art was belittled at that time (like it was on the rest of European territory), folklore was not written down and therefore it has survived until the present time only fragmentary. The above mentioned processes lasted even until the nineteenth century, until the so called First Latvian Awakening (1850–1880).

Having been influenced for centuries by diverse West-European (German, Russian, British, Swedish, Norwegian, Polish a.o) literary currents, Latvian national literature started to develop only in the middle of the nineteenth century gradually becoming complex, multidimensional, and hybrid. The second half of the nineteenth century is the beginning of the formation of national self-confidence, when seeking for Latvian identity became important. The first Latvian intellectuals (young

people), who have just received education, considered it important to develop the Latvian national culture and literary language, to collect folklore, and develop the national literature. The ideas of New-Latvians (Auseklis, Juris Alunāns, Krišjānis Valdemārs, Krišjānis Barons a.o.) were implemented in literature as the attempt to restore or create anew the Latvian code and thus prove to the Latvians that they can be and must be proud of their rustic culture. The New-Latvians created a poetic mythology, which today is often taken as an authentic Latvian people's folklore and mythology. Literature created by the New-Latvians and perceptions about the past in this literature were subordinated to one goal – to increase nation's self-confidence and shape the national identity. The New-Latvians stimulated the development of Latvian literature. The contribution of Andrejs Pumpurs to defining the national identity is very significant.

The New-Latvians opened up the opportunity for the development of the professional Latvian literature, which today is considered the classics. At the end of the nineteenth century great works were created by Matīss and Reinis Kaudzītes, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Jānis Poruks, Eduards Veidenbaums a. o., and the authors of later periods, deliberately or not, often relied on them.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the development of Latvian literature depended on two significant factors.

1) The ideas about the foundation of a national state were important for the society, and people were striving for freedom. The national aspect manifested itself more obviously, and though unconsciously to a great extent, the ideas about national resistance were evolving among the people. The ideas about independence were topical in all major historical events of that time, e. g. the 1905 revolution, World War I a. o., and they greatly facilitated the foundation of Latvian state in 1918.

2) At the turn of the century, a rapid process of Europeanization, stimulated by the official state policy, takes place; Latvian culture becomes open for fresh foreign winds; simultaneously, the whole cultural heritage of Europe comes in, and in Latvian cultural consciousness the processes of exploring this heritage, summing it up and analysing it — to accept it or not to accept — take place. At the same time, there exists romanticism, realism and trends of modernism emerge. Bronislavs Tabūns, specialist on literature, writes: “in Latvia, this process does not take place under conditions of a new cultural type replacing the former ones but rather by interacting with them, and quite often this occurs even in the creative work by one and the same author” (Tabūns 28).

The manifold Latvian literary heritage at this time was created by such well-known authors as Rainis, Aspazija, Vilis Plūdons, Jānis Poruks, Kārlis Skalbe, Jānis

Akuraters, Edvards Virza, Andrejs Upītis, Jānis Sudrabkalns, Aleksandrs Čaks a.o.

In the 1920–1930s, Latvian literature develops concurrently with European literature, acquiring the new trends and ideas and trying to customize the achievements of world literature of previous times (basically European, less — American) for their own cultural needs. The cultural-historical development of the country and the official priorities of the state policy (the specific character of the policy of the then head of state Kārlis Ulmanis — placing emphasis on Latvian values, development of agriculture etc.) determine also the formation of specifically Latvian literary phenomena at this time, namely, in the 30s of the twentieth century, a special trend of literature — the so called positivism — emerges. It does not relate to positivism in the nineteenth century philosophy, but it rather implements the idea that the foundation of Latvian identity is a rustic culture, and in it eternal values are to be found. Typical of positivism is also defining positive ethical and ideological values, which is directly contrary to negativism created by modernism and dominating among intellectuals at that time. The development of positivism in Latvian literature was enhanced by Edvards Virza, Aleksandrs Grīns, Jānis Veselis a.o.

The natural process of Latvian literature development was interrupted in 1940 when the troops of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics invaded Latvia. After World War II several well-known writers emigrated and then created Latvian literature in the diaspora. The most popular authors of exile literature are Mārtiņš Zīvertis, Dzintars Sodums, Valdis Zeps, Irma Grebzde, Anšlāvs Eglītis, Gunārs Janovskis, Veronika Strēlerte a. o. The Soviet ideology and strict censorship made a powerful impact upon the creative work in Latvia. For many years, it was possible to publish one's works only by strictly observing the principles of socialist realism. At the end of the 50s of the twentieth century, the changes created by the political thaw contributed to the emergence of new themes and artistic methods in Latvian literature, and modernistic works were written. The most outstanding authors of this period are Visvaldis Lāms, Alberts Bels, Regīna Ezera, Zigmunds Skujiņš, Ojārs Vācietis, Vizma Belševica, Imants Ziedonis, Māris Čaklais a.o. Due to the ideology in Soviet Latvia as well as in other Soviet Republics, the national peculiarities in the public discourse, literature including, were not mentioned. All that shaped and united a nation — mythology and folklore, history, symbols, memories, traditions —, everything that constitutes the spiritual heritage of a nation was replaced by new values created in the twentieth century, starting with the 1917 revolution and the foundation of the USSR. The issue of national identity was not brought into focus.

A new renaissance of national values began at the end of the 80s of the twentieth century when the ideas about regaining an independent state evolved in the so-

ciety. The production of rock-opera *Lāčplēsis* by Māra Zālīte and Zigmārs Liepiņš stands among the major events in this period. “The Latvian world perception, system of images, as well as the historical context of this rock-opera united the people, arousing individual’s feelings of national belonging and national identity” (Rutkēviča 54). The regaining of state independence in 1990 stimulated the re-evaluation of values in literature, experiments of postmodernism appeared rapidly, and a new generation of authors emerged who rejected the traditional methods of realism and started seeking for new ways of expression, laying stress on what was universally human rather than national. The most popular authors of this generation are Edvīns Raups, Aivars Ozoliņš, Jānis Vēveris, Gundega Repše, Nora Ikstena, Arvis Kolmanis, Pauls Bankovskis a.o.

From the 50s of the nineteenth century and until nowadays, Latvian literature has gone through several complicated developmental stages, when it was influenced by different internal processes of cultural development (which relate to the political, ideological and economic priorities of the country) and experienced the impact of other cultures (manifesting itself as both a conscious or unconscious orientation of Latvian culture towards acquiring values of European culture and as imposing the ideology and cultural features of other nations).

The celebrations of the centenary of Latvian state awakened new interest in national values and national identity. As the result, many fiction works about the past of Latvia, particularly about the twentieth century history, have been written. The attempts to describe the most important stages of Latvian history and features of national identity have been made by Gundega Repše, Nora Ikstena, Pauls Bankovskis, Māra Zālīte, Guntis Berelis, Arno Jundze, Inga Ābele, Laima Kota a. o.

Currently, special attention is given to popularizing Latvian literature in foreign countries. Recently the national support for bringing Latvian literature beyond our country’s borders has grown significantly and the translations of Latvian authors’ works into other languages have reached record levels. The works chosen for the translation are crucial for understanding Latvian national identity and culture as they offer postmodern re-evaluations of the by-gone times from the perspective of the present, however in most of the cases the authors of these works are contemporary writers. At present, works from the series *Mēs. Latvija, XX gadsimts* [We. Latvia. XX century] have become vastly popular in foreign countries, thus, for example, the novel *Mātes piens* [Soviet Milk] (2015) by Nora Ikstena will be published in 10 languages (Krenberga). Other novels of this series are being intensively translated into English and will be published soon.

However, the literati of the earlier stages of the development of Latvian litera-

ture, especially the ones who created their works almost a century ago, remain unknown for a foreign reader.

The cluster of articles published in the journal, *Forum for World Literatures Studies* has been prepared by the researchers of the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Daugavpils University, Latvia, with the aim to acquaint the English-speaking world with some of the significant representatives of the Latvian literature of the end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century in the context of West-European cultural and literary processes. The developmental stage of Latvian literary history discussed in the articles is important from the aspect of Latvian national identity, since at this time serious attempts to define and shape Latvian identity are made, being aware of our own place within the system of European culture.

Taking into account the fact that the influence of Western esotericism on literature is an unexplored field in Latvian literary studies, in her paper *The Presence of Western Esotericism in Latvian Literature* Anita Stasulane analyses the creative works by the Latvian writers (Antons Austriņš (1884–1934), Viktors Eglītis (1877–1945), Rihards Rudzītis (1898–1960) and Konstantīns Raudive (1909–1974) who since the end of the nineteenth century had been searching for new means of expression and looking for a source of inspiration in esotericism, thus gaining metaphors and symbols from Spiritualism, Theosophy and Agni Yoga/Living Ethics. The influence of esotericism on the writers' literary works is not uniform: some adopted theosophical ideas from the primary source — Russian artists Nicholas Roerich and Helena Roerich —, while others were influenced indirectly. Anita Stasulane states that Agni Yoga/Living Ethics has influenced the world of Latvian artists in various degrees: some adopted theosophical ideas without any sort of critical approach; others did some sifting and reworked these ideas; some artists had read only a few theosophical articles, from which they gained some idea; others discovered new ideas through the circle of their friends, without even suspecting that these were theosophical ideas.

The subject of regionalism and the representation of regional identity have been studied by Alina Romanovska in her research *The Search for Regional Identity: Latgale in Latvian Literature in the First Decades of the Twentieth Century*. The paper focuses on the period of the national awakening and establishment of the statehood of Latvia, as well as on the time that was extremely important for the formation of Latvianness, Latvian national and regional identities. The analysis of the narrative of the south-eastern part of Latvia — Latgale, based primarily on the literary texts by Antons Austriņš, who was one of the first Latvian writers depict-

ing Latgale, allows establishing the indicators of regional identity. A. Romanovska concludes, “No matter how hard Latvian writers wanted to dive into the Latgalian identity, to grasp all its features, it was still impossible, as they remained foreigners for this land. It also determines the importance of the category of mysteriousness in Latgale’s descriptions by Latvian authors. These writers often looked at Latgale from the perspective of a traveller, or a guest, therefore, the highlighted features of Latgale are the same: the cult of Catholicism, the idea of preserving of ancient values, the beauty and mystery of Latgale’s nature, the peculiarities of the people’s nature and behaviour, the flair of the Latgalian language, the peculiarities of historical development.”

In Latvia there are authors who during specific periods of their literary career have been impacted by the representatives of Symbolism and who have turned to the symbolic and/or ironic expression. In her paper *Post-Symbolist Irony on the Latvian Stage: The Staging of Van Charles Lerberghe’s “Pan” And Maurice Maeterlinck’s “Le Miracle De Saint Antoine”* Simona Sofija Valke states that “Symbolism, with its intrinsic values, exhorted Latvian writers to fight for independence of the literature, of ideology, and public utility.” The study on the staging of van Lerberghe’s *Pan* and Maeterlinck’s *Le Miracle de saint Antoine* of the 1920s aims at not only identifying the change in the reception of two authors in the Latvian cultural space, but also discusses the concept of creative freedom, important for this epoch.

One of the crucial influences on the Latvian literature have been exercised by Oscar Wilde’s one-act tragedy *Salomé* (1891) and Richard Strauss’ monumental opera *Salome* (1905). The study *Reception of Opera “Salome” by Richard Strauss in Aspazija’s Novel “The Autumn Nightingale”* by Ilze Kacane demonstrates the importance of the opera *Salome* in Latvia’s cultural space of the first half of the twentieth century. The work by Aspazija is a vast description of cultural-historical epoch and an emotional depiction of spiritual atmosphere that go beyond the limits of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The author looks back not only on the life of *femme fatale* (also on her own), but also on that of Latvia, the individual and national identity. “At depicting the atmosphere in the nation’s biography and perception of woman in the society in a specific period of its history, the “alien” discourse in Aspazija’s novel becomes “one’s own” pre-text and indicates to changes in individual and nation’s consciousness, and consequently to changes in a specific cultural space” (I. Kacane).

The final paper of the section *Latvia in Russian Literature (1901–1940)* by Zans Badins analyses Latvian and Russian literary contacts and describes the reception of Baltic culture space, particularly Latvia, in the works by Russian writers

till 1940. The territory that was mostly inhabited by the Latvians and that had been a part of the Russian Empire since the eighteenth century did not exist in the consciousness of the Russians as Latvia for a very long time, i.e. till the foundation of independent Latvia in 1918. For this reason, the perception of Latvia and the “text of Latvia” developed gradually and was first incorporated in the paradigm of the “Baltic text.” The scholar analyses three types of perception models that demonstrate an attitude towards Latvia in the Russian artistic and public consciousness: 1) the portrayal of Latvia in the framework of the binary opposition “we – they” till 1918, 2) the portrayal of the attitude by the Soviet Russian writers towards a new independent country after the proclamation of independence of Latvia, and 3) the perception of Latvia by Russian writers who were living in Latvia and by Russian émigré writers from 1918 till 1940.

On 18 November 1919, to mark the first anniversary of the country, in the article “The Foreign Policy of Latvia” by the first Foreign Minister of the Republic of Latvia, Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics, it was written:

[..] The state of Latvia, having achieved the recognition of its de facto independence by the allied powers, has acquired several de iure rights of sovereign states, thereby winning for itself, step by step, a rightful and deserving place among other free states [...] Latvia is in the making! In the making, despite all our big and strong historical enemies; it is going to be beautiful and free, created by the Latvians’ own hands, cemented with the precious blood of our sons [...]. (Meierovics 7)

While celebrating the biggest event in the history of modern Latvia — the centenary of the Republic of Latvia — we can still say — Latvian literature, the same as Latvia, is still in the making. Although the history of Latvian national literature dates back only one-and-a-half centuries, it is rooted in Latvian cultural heritage of more than 300,000 folk songs. Nowadays “Latvia has an active publishing industry with 2,177 new titles being published every year. Latvia ranks second in Europe in the export market share of books printed, export value being 74%. Books illustrated by Latvian artists and printed in Latvia are frequently nominated and awarded prizes in The Most Beautiful Books in the World competition” (*Introduction to...*).

By acquainting the international audience with some tendencies of Latvian literature, we “export” our cultural heritage and hope to contribute to the re-evaluation of Latvia’s national history and cultural heritage.

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