

Antons Austrīņš' Oeuvre in Cultural Context

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Abstract Literary texts are inextricably linked to the context of the time when they were written — culture, historical, and social situation at a particular time influences writers' consciousness and determines the forms and special features of the content of their literary work, as well as literary work affects the consciousness of society. Therefore, in order to fully understand the peculiarities of a particular author or literary work and their role in literature and culture at that time, the study analyses literary works of the Latvian writer Antons Austrīņš (1884 - 1934) in a broader context. This goal defines the specificity of further research and determines its interdisciplinary methodology using theories and schools of a biographical approach, new historicism, structuralism, semiotics, hermeneutics, etc.

The specificity of the late 19th century and early 20th century European culture situation marked by a change of culture paradigms made an essential impact on Austrīņš' world perception and determined the peculiarities of his artistic searching. His search for an individual expression makes the writer a part of the existing culture paradigm of his epoch. European culture at that time witnessed the coexistence of two opposed culture types — realism and modernism. In Latvia, their coexistence was especially obvious as features of realism and modernism appeared in the work of almost all younger generation writers. Austrīņš' prose in this respect is a typical phenomenon of Latvian literature as it accumulates traits of several culture types. Significantly, the writer's individual spiritual searching (solutions of his personal ethical and aesthetical problems, hesitation between the traditional and decadent values) fostered by the liminal situations of his life are organically related to the changes in the culture situation in general. Therefore, the coexistence of several literary trends and types in Austrīņš' prose was determined not only by the culture situation but also his individual life experiences.

Key words Latvian literature; cultural context; modernism; Austrīņš,

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Introduction

Each epoch creates its own picture of literary history depending on the dominant features of the world vision, artistic criteria, system of values, etc. Any literary work, irrespective of the artistic value it determines, is an important proof of the existence of a nation, mode of expression of the system of values of a certain epoch and reflection of its identity. In order to develop at present as complete a notion of the past processes of literature development as possible, it is necessary to describe and analyse each, even its smallest segment, and produce a thorough analysis of every writer's work. Jelena Korolova, Zans Badins and Alina Romanovska indicate that

fiction is an indicator and creator of spiritual search. Depicting their characters' life process in peculiar historical period, writers reproduce not only their own subjective, but also nation's collective understanding of time portrayed from contemporary perspective, subordinating narrative to certain artistic conception. In this respect fiction becomes an extremely important research object. (Korolova, Badins, Romanovska 192)

Sangeeta Vatsa specifies:

Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. (Vatsa 114)

The goal of this research is to study Anton Austrīņš' literary work in a broader cultural context, highlighting how processes in culture and politics influenced the writer's work and how the writer and his work contributed to the creation of the

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Latvian national identity.

The research attempts to bring into focus a little-known author whose work reflects an optimistic vision of the world, ability to notice the wondrous and surprising in everyday life matters, paying great attention to details and respect to the Latvian people; his style of writing is marked by an amazing feeling of the language, simplicity, rhythmicity, and musicality. Austrīņš' (1884-1934) life was dynamic, varied, adventurous; his character and world view were formed during rough trials and joyful moments. The writer's work possesses significant autobiographical aspects reflecting, to a great extent, his life reality, experiences, and emotions.

The literary legacy of Austrīņš is not widely known to contemporary readers, yet it deserves consideration and deeper study as a peculiar phenomenon that in miniature reflects specific features of the literary development of the epoch and presents the ardent searchings and original findings of the writer's individual poetic style.

Austrīņš' literary oeuvre is versatile, rich, and demands a second thought as to its evaluation; he has produced poetry, short prose fiction, plays, feuilletons, and a novel-chronicle. Beside significant works that possess a constant value in the history of Latvian literature there are works that seem to be doomed to oblivion. Many works by Austrīņš, especially those that were written in his mature age, e.g. prose collections *Māras zemē* (In Land of Māra; 1919), *Puiškāns* (The Lad; 1930), *Neievērotie* (The Unnoticed; 1931), poetry collections *Saules grieži* (Equinox; 1923), *Dzīves burvība* (Charm of Life; 1925), *Aizsaule* (The Netherland; 1933), etc., have gained a positive evaluation by the writer's contemporaries. The novel-chronicle *Garā jūdze* (The Long Mile; I - 1926, II, III - 1934) was a well-known literary phenomenon of the epoch that through the lens of subjective experience reveals not only facts of the author's biography but also the twists of the history and culture contexts of the age. Response of the writer's contemporaries testify to the fact that Austrīņš' oeuvre was a significant part of the culture process of his time, and this is much more important than his successors' incidental, subjective evaluations determined by the culture values and ideological systems of the following generations. The widespread notion of Austrīņš as a second-rate writer is clear evidence of the obscure regularities that guide writing a history of literature with their incidences, subjectivism, and dependence on political and ideological standpoints.

Investigating the intersections of Austrīņš' life and writing, major attention is attributed to the writer's work, particularly prose, whereas biographical data are

used along with the characteristics of the historico-cultural picture as additional material for a more detailed understanding of the dominant qualities of the writer's work. The use of a biographical approach, and theories of new historicism, structuralism, semiotics, hermeneutics, etc. determined the scientific style of the research. Awareness in the importance of historical, cultural, literary, and biographical contexts for the understanding of the text forms the conceptual basis of the research.

Special Features of the Cultural Context

In the late 19th century - early 20th century alongside with the traditional values and virtues rooted in traditional experience, the tendencies of foreign culture started to play an important role; fast Europeanization began. Latvian culture becomes open to new foreign trends. The situation in Latvia at that time is specific: the whole of European cultural heritage entered the Latvian culture at the same time; the Latvian cultural consciousness was absorbed in the processes of cognition, compilation, and analysis (acceptance or non-acceptance) of this heritage. Bronislavs Tabūns writes:

Bright artistic values are created both by Romanticism and Realism. In addition, new trends, which were formed in the literature of bigger nations in the West earlier, start to manifest themselves. In Latvia, this process takes place not replacing the existing type of culture with a new one, but under the conditions of interacting between them, and often even in the works by the same author. (Tabūns 28)

Conceptual changes reflected in Latvian culture, including Austriņš' prose, began in Europe already in the second half of the 19th century, when various trends and movements coexisted complementing each other. In the middle of the 19th century, based on the philosophy of positivism, realism and naturalism coexisted, which is characterized by the appeal to everyday images, emphasizing a person's social and biological determinacy, and highlighting common typical features. The desire to depict real life as it is, is one of the most essential features of this trend. The trend is based on the philosophy of positivism — theoretical views of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Hippolyte Adolphe Taine.

Representatives of naturalism focused on and analysed only a person's physiological features without connecting them to spiritual manifestations. In the mid-19th century, ideas about the irrational sphere of the world became relevant and the existence of super-reality (the highest, divine sphere) was again declared a

protest against this one-sided explanation of a person.

The earliest reaction to positivism ideology emerged in France in the mid-19th century: in 1857, Charles Pierre Baudelaire published a collection of poems *The Flowers of Evil*, which offered a fundamentally new understanding of aesthetic categories and shocked society of that time by its openly expressed protest against philistinism. In the 1880s French symbolists actively made themselves known. In 1886 Jean Moreas published the *Symbolist Manifesto*, in which he advocated “pure poetry” that is not affected by ideology, performs only aesthetic functions, and exists on the principle “art for art’s sake” (Barzun). Paul-Marie Verlaine, Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud, etc. create this type of poetry. Symbolism also developed in the German-speaking countries.

In the 1890s a sharp reaction to the positivism ideology arose in England. During the Victorian time, England had a high level of scientific and technical achievements. Aestheticism, with Oscar Wilde being its brightest representative, emerged as a protest against the understanding of a person as a mechanical being. The idea of “art for art’s sake” was emphasized, and the category of aesthetic beauty was appealed to as the fight against the reality of life.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche’s philosophy is another vivid example of protests emerged in the second half of the 19th century in Germany. In the late 19th - early 20th century, views of the German philosopher symbolised a universal protest against existing ethical and aesthetic values. Literary works of many writers of that time should be interpreted in the context of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The philosopher observed the decline of European culture and searched for its causes; he proposed the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts as a symbolic reflection of the development of European culture. Nietzsche’s contradictory philosophy and the specific artistic character of his works open up a wide range of opportunities for interpretations, which ensured the popularity of his ideas. The emphasis on the Overhuman phenomenon, the idea of the “eternal return”, the juxtaposition of the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts, the death of God, the problem of Christianity, etc. are the most significant concepts of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

Nietzsche’s views are largely in line with the views of another German philosopher Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler. In the 1920s his work *The Decline of the West* (1918) acquired a wide popularity. In his work, the author examined the development of European culture, opposing culture and civilization — there is an unsurmountable gap between them. Spengler spoke about cyclical theories of culture. The philosopher distinguished eight cultures that are mature in their development: Egyptian, Indian, Babylonian, Magic (Arab-Byzantine), Chinese,

Apollonian (Greco-Roman), Faustian (Western European), and Mayan cultures. The existence of these cultures is not a single process in the world history, but the unity of life in the universe. These cultures develop on the basis of the same principle — the rise is followed by the fall; they go through three development stages: pre-culture — culture — civilization. Western European culture is at the final stage of its development, which means its decline. Spengler, as well as Nietzsche and many other authors in the mid-19th century - early 20th century declared the crisis of European culture.

Theoretical views of the French philosopher Henri Louis Bergson also had an immense impact on the changes in perception of time. He countered time with space, emphasizing that time is uninterrupted, while space is interrupted. In the context of the early 20th century literature, there is a fundamental idea of the all-encompassing power of intuition. The artist's intuition which ensures the unity with the origins of the world was especially important.

These philosophical ideas vividly reflected the key concepts for changing culture paradigm in the mid-19th century - early 20th century, and defined the worldview reflected in literary works. In general, in European culture, under the influence of the social and political situation, there was a change in the perception of the world; the ideas of revaluation of values and creation of new ethical and aesthetic priorities dominated.

Changes in European culture in the 19th century marked the change in human consciousness. At that time, European human consciousness shifted from mythological to de-mythological (in realism and naturalism), which in turn is replaced by a neo-mythological (a type of modernist culture) consciousness. Subjective, individual perception of the world is essential for the type of modernist culture. Therefore, an individual myth (an individual version of the world) is created within the framework of neo-mythological consciousness. Modernism developed a number of individual ideas about a supernatural spiritual sphere. In contrast to the linear flow of time, the emphasis was on cyclicity, subjective time, and instantaneous moment. Modernism highlighted a subjective perception of the world and life of an individual soul.

In the second half of the 19th century ideas on the formation of a national state became especially relevant in Latvian culture. Arguments for forming a nation were mainly found in the ideas expressed by National Romanticism. They dwell upon the significance of traditional national material and non-material values for the further development (Kalnačs 23-24). Therefore, a special emphasis was put on the study of folklore, as folklore texts provide evidence of the harmonious ideal past

— the golden era when the nation was united. These forms of historical unity and togetherness were considered the basis for the formation of states and nations (Bula 29-30). The 1905 revolution is a political climax of the processes described, but the establishment of national states in 1918 is their logical conclusion. These political events also had a significant impact on the development of literature and culture.

In the late 19th century - first decades of the 20th century, not only Western European, but also Russian cultural trends were relevant in Latvian culture. It was determined by both the socio-political situation and economic and cultural contacts. In the early 20th century, many Latvian writers of young generation (Viktors Eglītis, Pāvils Gruzna, Fallijs, etc.) studied and lived in St. Petersburg. They established close contacts with Russian symbolists, were actively engaged in the events organised by Russian intelligentsia, and attended their meetings.

Typological similarities as well as genetic contacts — influences and borrowings united Latvian and Russian cultures at that time. At the turn of the century, both Russian and Latvian cultures found themselves in the situation when they were ready to accept European cultural heritage. German, British, French, Polish, and Scandinavian literature provided significant sources for inspiration. Both cultures established modernism paradigms, taking the experience of European culture as a model, and the sources which Latvian and Russian authors address and refer to are similar.

Not only the geographic proximity of the countries and their common national status determined the parallel development of the two literatures — Latvian and Russian, but mainly it was a great interest in the aesthetic phenomenon of the turn of the century. Authors expressed a special interest in the philosophical ideas of Neocantianism, in the concepts of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, etc., at the same time naturally incorporating problems, themes, and motives of such representatives of symbolism literature as Edgar Poe, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Maeterlinck, Mallarme, George, Ibsen, Hamsun, Pshibishevsky, Strindberg, etc. in the sphere of their interests. (Sproģe, Vāvere 14)

It is important to mention that Latvian readers became acquainted with the texts by the abovementioned authors in translations made by Russian authors. It determined the specific character of their perception.

The most significant changes in perception of the world are related to ethical and aesthetic concepts of decadence and symbolism in both Russian and Latvian

cultures. Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Konstantin Balmont, Valery Bryusovs, and Vyacheslav Ivanov are the most distinguished representatives and theoreticians of this literary trend. In terms of themes and motives, Russian symbolism is close to Latvian decadence. The idea of a new personality that is free from social determinacy is emphasized; the special attention is on the spiritual life of a person and the focus is on the Dionysian energy; taboo topics are highlighted; authors address eroticism, death aestheticization, justification of a physical aspect of a personality, etc. They also experiment with creative forms and genres; descriptions of individual genres become popular (a novel chronicle, a novel myth, a story of a soul, a night book, etc.), which contributes to the active use of cultural citations and creates dialogue, metaphorization, and ambiguity.

When new trends enter into Latvian literature, emphasising of a “foreign” text becomes essential. There are works based on dialogues — intertextual citations and reminiscence links. A new literary paradigm is created and implemented by such authors as Edvards Virza, Jānis Akuraters, Pāvels Grūzna, Linards Laicens, Eduards Vulfs, Valdemārs Dambergs, Viktors Eglītis, Haralds Eldgasts, Fallijs and others, known as decadent and/or symbolists in the history of Latvian literature. Austriņš is also included in this list of authors. The over excessive use of citations often negatively affects the artistic quality of texts, and does not allow realizing a concept comprehensively. Therefore, many young authors who strive to perceive and implement in their works all the latest trends of European literature attract sharp criticism and irony from the adherents of traditional ethic and aesthetic values (Jansons-Brauns 40).

Open and conscious use of artistic facts from other cultures, inclusion of cultural citations and reminiscences in texts, as well as demonstrative reference to the author of the borrowed text are characteristic features of Latvian decadence and symbolism. A literary scientist Vāvere believes that

a conscious reference to a certain cultural layer is a common phenomenon in literary works at different times. However, it is mostly revealed in the form of hidden citations, reminiscences, stylistic borrowings. In this sense, it seems that the initial stage of modernism, where all references were demonstratively referred to in the text, is a unique phenomenon in the history of literature. (Vāvere 300-301)

Researchers relate the use of a “foreign” text which is a characteristic feature of symbolism and decadence to the artistic principles of symbolism: firstly, the

conceptual meaning of symbols in the works of art and the nature of a symbol, mainly its polysemy which provides the explanation of one meaning through another; secondly, theoretical principles of symbolism, namely, the theory of *panaestheticism* declared by them, that is, the idea of the aesthetic as the deepest meaning in the world, whose transformation is linked to the active aestheticizing of life (Vāvere).

Despite the rapid entry of foreign literature trends, it should be noted that a tradition rather than an experiment prevails both in Latvian and Lithuanian literature in the early 20th century. Researchers admit that this situation was determined by the fact that literature in these countries was very young and could not afford to be in opposition to the old, as the aesthetic structures which were considered traditional and traditional literary paradigms had not yet established (Vecgrāvis 186, Berelis 41).

World Culture Contexts and a Biographical Element in Austrīņš' Oeuvre

Latvian literature in the early 20th century featured characteristics of realism and naturalism as well as impressionism and modernism. Austrīņš' talent as a writer was formed in the situation of interaction between culture types and trends. His spiritual crisis, existential fears, his feeling of unfreedom resonated with the ethical and aesthetical paradigm of decadence and art system of symbolism. Being engaged in the processes of changing the European culture paradigm and actively responding to the latest trends, nevertheless, Austrīņš strived to incorporate his individual perception of the world in his texts, and to create and preserve his specific identity.

Austrīņš may not have known theoretical views of early modernists, symbolists, etc. in detail. However, he could get acquainted with them through Latvian decadent and Russian symbolists. Therefore, being aware of the processes undergoing in the cultural space of that time, Austrīņš partly intuitively, partly consciously applied relevant artistic techniques and included popular cultural texts in his prose.

Despite the fact that Austrīņš supported decadent experiments, especially at early stages of his literary work, he willingly involved ideas and works of Latvian authors in his texts, although much less frequently than texts of European literature. Among Latvian classical poets, Austrīņš always greatly respected Poruks and Rainis (Ērmanis 27). Austrīņš also highly appreciated Rūdolfs Blaumanis, who inspired his development as an author at the beginning of his literary career. Blaumanis' influence can be seen in Austrīņš' several realistic short stories.

Russian culture texts had a significant impact on Austrīņš' artistic consciousness. To a large extent, it was determined by the writer's biography: his studying at

the parish school was in Russian, and his studies and life in St. Petersburg contributed to his knowledge of Russian culture. In addition, Austriņš' trips to St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Novgorod during the years of runaway provided him with new nuances in the perception of Russian everyday culture.

Russian culture was subjectively close to Austriņš: he translated works by Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Dmirty Merzhkovsky, Valery Bryusov, etc. into Latvian language. It should be noted that Russian was the only foreign language which Austriņš was fluent in and he could read complex philosophical texts in this language. Therefore, the Latvian writer's ideas of the culture phenomena in Western Europe, Scandinavia, and America were mainly formed through Russian culture. Russian culture provided Austriņš with an important source for inspiration as well as enabled his connections with the European culture heritage.

In both periods of his oeuvre, the structure and conception of the world model created in Austriņš' prose reveal features of both realism and modernism. The characteristic traits of modernism in his works are the depiction of the world as having two spheres (the actual and the transcendent, supra-real), foregrounding the individual's subjective experience, formation of an individual version and a new myth of the world. Traits of modernism in Austriņš' prose works appear not only at the level of ideas but also in their structure, e.g. story *Čaikovska kvartets* (Chaikovsky's Quartet) attempts at synthesizing regularities of music and literature, novel-chronicle *Garā jūdze* (The Long Mile) is a specific sample of merging genres of a chronicle and a novel that in its fragmented structure reflects the peculiarities of modern human's thinking.

The second period of Austriņš' creative work is usually treated by critics in connection with realism as it lacks militant decadence but acknowledges life values and traditional morality. At this stage Austriņš is no longer bound by decadence experiments; he reduces the use of cultural citations and does not very often mention names of foreign authors; the evidence of vital power and joy for every moment lived replaces pessimism and ideas of death, the desire to describe everything seen and felt in real life by depicting the everyday beauty of life and paying attention to subtle seemingly insignificant details becomes relevant. Some of Austriņš' stories are bright samples of realistic narrative. However, the peculiarities of the world model in his works testify to the fact that also in the second period of his work the writer preserves features of a world picture characteristic of modernism. Refraining from decadence and symbolism, Austriņš started creating works that were related to the trend of acmeism. Both in his poetry and short prose he emphasized the poetics of everyday life and depicted seemingly insignificant details both in prose and poet-

ry, cultivating the language, searching for bright archaic words, dialect words, thus trying to make his images vital and sensual, at the same time not losing the simplicity of narration and language. The writer regards as important the awareness of the applied worth of the world, precision and clarity of the poetic word, definiteness of the image, highlighting the beauty of reality and everyday life. Turning to the genre of sketch made it possible for the writer to merge harmoniously detailed factography with emotionality and subjectivity, as a result forming a reality based subjectively emotional world picture.

Austrīņš' oeuvre manifests both features of realism and modernism, national Latvian and generally human and cosmopolitan values. His works possess original poetics and reveal a peculiar world vision that has been developed from the writer's personal experience. Austrīņš' oeuvre is a specific phenomenon in Latvian literature that brings out a bond with the popular culture concepts of the early 20th century: he extensively applies the autobiographical mode of writing, depicts the schisms of the modern personality's consciousness and search for a new and better personality, focuses on the issues of relations among nature, culture, and civilization, highlights the subjectivism and emotionality of the world perception.

The autobiographical text based on the description of rural Latvia is the brightest feature of Austrīņš' oeuvre, especially in the second period of his literary work. The beginning and creation of *Latgale*'s text is the writer's significant contribution to Latvian literature. Antons Austrīņš was one of the first Latvian writers who showed *Latgale* in his literary texts. Since 1909, his first visit to *Latgale*, the author paid special attention to the study of this region's features; he participated in the meetings with *Latgale*'s culture experts, collected newspaper articles on *Latgale*, wrote down dialect words, created a collection of *Latgalian* toponyms and proper names. Alina Romanovska writes that "it is *Latgale* that Austrīņš connected the origins of Latvian people and the idea of spiritual revival to" (Romanovska 52). Austrīņš's contemporaries had a critical attitude towards his commitment to and idealization of *Latgale*, as this region in the consciousness of Latvia's people had an image of an uneducated and undeveloped province. Reviewers believed that *Latgale* in the works by Austrīņš was too idealized (Paegle, 1920; Sudrabkalns, 1919; Virza, 1930). Romanovska believes that "Austrīņš created nostalgia for the harmonious past using the image of *Latgale* and he associated it with the origins of the national identity" (Romanovska 132). Austrīņš' personal experience determined his subjective approach, as in *Latgale* he felt at home and safe. There is also an important ideological and political subtext in the idealized creation of the *Latgalian* text: Austrīņš attempted to include the *Latgalian* region in the single image of Latvia.

This played an important role before the establishment of the independent state and during first years of its existence, as Austriņš made Latgale close and interesting for Latvian readers.

With his search for the ways of individual expression, the writer is organically included in the general culture situation in Europe as well as in Latvia. Two opposite culture types — realism and modernism continue to exist in European culture, and their specific coexistence is also observed in Austriņš' oeuvre. A person's subjective experience is foregrounded in the structure of the author's world model and he creates an individual worldview (this is vividly expressed in the author's late collections of short stories *Māras zemē*, and *Puišķans*), while his attention to the description of details is the evidence of the features of realism.

Conclusion

Austriņš uses in his works the most widespread and popular early 20th century world culture codes and texts, yet selects them and adjusts to his own individual world perception. The subjective in Austriņš' prose dominates over the supra national. He has used literary images of foreign writers as metaphors, allusions, or culture citations very fruitfully. Important sources of inspiration that have influenced the formation of Austriņš' worldview are found in Latvian, Russian, Italian, Spanish, German and other cultures. However, such intertextuality, an interplay of various culture citations, is not self-sufficient, the writer is not carried away by intertextual games; what matters more is the revelation of the individual experience in texts. Not refraining from the inclusion of autobiographical motifs and details in his works and the foregrounding of his subjective worldview make Austriņš' oeuvre a unique phenomenon of the literature of his time.

Regarding the presence of European culture paradigms in Austriņš' prose, there emerge two different stages in his works. The first is the period of decadence (approximately till 1910), the second is the stage of recognizing the traditional moral values (1910 - 1934). Highlighting the world culture text in his prose works is more characteristic of the first period of Austriņš' writing. During this period, he uses abundant citations, refers to the foreign authors' names popular at that time and current ideas of the turn of the centuries. Causes for such an approach in the poetics of prose works are related both to subjective reasons and the specificity of the general culture situation. Firstly, the writer's identity at that time was under the process of formation, he had not defined his mode of expression yet, therefore was just searching for justification of his ideas in texts by other authors. Secondly, an essential feature of Latvian culture situation at that time was familiarization with the culture

of other nations. During the second period of his writing, Austrīņš emphasizes autobiographical text and subjective world perception to a greater extent and strives to position himself not as “one among others” but as an independent individuality. Being included into the culture trends of his time and reflecting current processes in society, Austrīņš balances between realism and modernism and searches for new forms of expression. During his short artistic life, he went through several stages of development — decadence, symbolism, realism, and acmeism — and he found his individual modernism style in prose and poetry. Austrīņš develops and forms the collective consciousness of Latvian society by emphasizing and individually interpreting significant texts of Latvian culture (the 1905 revolution text, Latgale text, Piebalga text, etc.).

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