

PAULS DAIJA, BENEDIKTS KALNAČS

THE GENESIS OF LATVIAN LITERARY CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN LITERATURE

ABSTRACT: This paper traces the main transformations in the formation of Latvian literary culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Looking at these processes from a comparative perspective, we detect four major turning points that are of special interest here. First, we observe how religious literature turns secular during the second half of the eighteenth century in the context of the so-called Popular Enlightenment, and what this change means for the perception of written texts. Secondly, we scrutinize the process in which former readers among ethnic Latvians become interested in writing. Thirdly, we put the dawn of romantic nationalism in Latvian literary contexts into comparative perspective. Finally, we argue that the representation of urban life at the end of the nineteenth century testifies to the swift rise of Latvian literature overcoming the constraints of belated modernity and marking participation in European literary trends.

KEYWORDS: Latvian Literary Culture; Popular Enlightenment; Revolution of Reading; Handwritten Literature; Romantic Nationalism; Urban Modernity.

Introduction

In this paper we focus on major transformations in the history of Latvian literary culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the time characterized as the dawn of national literature. This period provides a fascinating case of breakthrough both in terms of professional quality as well as with regard to the role of literature in society. The concept of national literature is important here as it signals the wide range of opportunities gradually acquired by the authors. During an earlier period of Reformation and Counter-Reformation that marked the sixteenth-century beginnings of Latvian literary culture, the main contributors were Baltic German clergy who translated religious hymns specifically intended for Latvian peasants suppressed to a socially lower position as serfs. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Latvian literature had fully matured and became comparable to literatures of other cultivated European nations or *Kulturnationen*. Our interest in this paper is to trace the main stages in this process that made such an overwhelming development possible. We thus focus on four turning points in the history of Latvian literature that can be considered significant milestones in terms of the authors' rising self-awareness and their adaptation to modernity in culture and society.

I. The religious literature turns secular

Between the sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, there were notable achievements in the sphere of Latvian religious literature that marked the first steps in the formation of Latvian literary culture. Of special importance were Baroque hymns and sermons as well as the translation of the Bible in the seventeenth century. The religious literature in Latvian was established by Baltic German clergy. Poetry translations were made from German and to a lesser extent from Swedish and Polish sources that were determined by the historical and political conditions (Grudule 2019; cf. also Scholz 1990; Sabaliauskas 1993).

The secular turn in Latvian literature took place in the mid-eighteenth century. In 1766, Gotthard Friedrich Stender, a Baltic German Lutheran pastor, published a volume of prose fiction, *Jaukas pasakas in stāsti* (*Pleasant tales and stories*), largely influenced by the fables of Christian Fürchtegott Gellert. In 1774, a volume of poetry *Jaunas ziņģes* (*New songs*) followed, inspired by German anacreontic poetry. Both publications for the first time featured secular and enlightening content, addressing the Latvian reading public¹ (Frīde 2003; Grudule 2018). A series of books along with almanacs and periodicals that followed in the second half of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century encompassed a wide variety of topics. The secular publications included not only fiction (the first translated drama was published in Latvian in 1790, and the first novel in 1824), but also agricultural and medical instructions, essays, and texts of popular science, thus the scope of these publications might be characterized as truly encyclopaedic. These texts were mostly written according to the programmatic ideas of the so-called Popular Enlightenment (*Volksaufklärung*). Popular Enlightenment was an educational reform movement that strived to modernize rural society by promoting change in the mentality of the peasants. As the school network remained relatively poor, the books became the main tool of enlightening the reading public. Literature turned out to be an instrument for promoting social and individual change, hence didactic and cultivating trends predominated. The main aim of the authors was to instruct, to teach, and to civilize peasants. The ideas of Popular Enlightenment originated in the German-speaking countries, and most of the literary works published in Latvian were adapted translations from German. The most significant texts of the German Popular Enlightenment, including the bestselling *Noth und Hülfsbüchlein* (1788) by Rudolf Zacharias Becker, in 1791, and *Goldmacherdorf* (1817) by Heinrich Zschokke, in 1830, were translated as well as works by philanthropist pedagogues Christian Gotthilf Salzmann, Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow, and Johann Heinrich Campe (Grudule 2011; Taterka 2012).

The Popular Enlightenment has been characterized as the moderate wing of the Baltic Enlightenment (Apinis 2000, 20), opposed to the radical aspirations represented

¹ There were previous secular works, mostly occasional poetry that circulated among educated Baltic German elites.

by Garlieb Merkel and others who advocated the abolishment of serfdom and created a pre-nationalist imagery of the past and an identity for Latvians (Mix et al. 2017). The Popular Enlightenment, to the contrary, remained apolitical and oriented toward the peasant class. It is possible to set apart two directions of the Popular Enlightenment. The first one was linked to the promotion of control and self-discipline aimed at making peasants better and more efficient workmen. This trend developed the image of an 'ideal peasant', a half utopian literary construct that aimed at self-perfection and can be viewed as a precursor of nineteenth-century self-help literature (Daija 2017, 77–104). The long story *Kā Paleijas Jānis savu būšanu kopis* (*How Paleijas Jānis cultivated his well-being*) by the pastor Gustav Brasche, in which sentimental narrative of the *Bildungsroman* tradition merged with agricultural instructions of encyclopaedic scope, was such an example of peasant education. The second direction was more emancipative and attempted to provide translations of middle-class literature that destabilized class boundaries and established the autonomy of entertainment. As early as 1804, the pastor Karl Gotthard Elverfeld translated *An die Freude* by Friedrich Schiller as well as August von Kotzebue's plays, and wrote an idyll in hexameter. This was an experiment that demonstrated the aesthetic possibilities of the Latvian language as well as widened the spectrum of the Popular Enlightenment (Taterka 2011).

Overall, the emancipatory and modernizing role of Popular Enlightenment literature can be described on two levels: it enclosed the Latvian peasants in new information networks and strengthened the transition from oral to written communication models; it also encouraged peasants to become the agents of their lives, to develop self-initiative and to fashion their identity in new ways. The secular turn not only modernized Latvian literature, but also created the beginnings of almost all genres in Latvian literature: most of the texts popular enlighteners wrote were the first of a kind.

Still, the main authors of Popular Enlightenment literature were Baltic German clergy who (in line with the contemporary assumptions of expanding the role of a rural parson) saw their mission not only in religious, but also in enlightening work in secular terms. In the vertical, top-down communication system, Latvian serfs were assigned only to the role of readers, and thus they were passive recipients of Popular Enlightenment. In the system of literary communication, the wall between authors and readers remained stable and fixed. Nevertheless, by the turn of the nineteenth century, secular literary practices in Latvian had been established. In 1804, it was stated in the Baltic German press that the Latvians already had a literature of their own (Albers 1804), and in 1812, the first (German language) history of Latvian literature (Zimmermann 1812) was published.

II. The readers become writers

Since the mid-eighteenth century, another significant transformation of writing in Latvian gradually took place. Along with the arrival of the Moravian missionaries in Livland, one of the Baltic provinces of imperial Russia, in the 1730s, handwritten

underground literature in Latvian began to circulate among those Latvian peasants who became members of the Moravian Brethren. The Brethren movement grew rapidly and acquired a wide range of followers; as its semi-legal status called for secrecy, the ceremonial texts were circulated in manuscripts rather than being published (with some notable exceptions, for instance, hymns). Initially, the authors, translators, and copyists of Moravian texts were German missionaries, but early on ethnic Latvian authors joined them. By the turn of the nineteenth century, a considerable quantity of literary works already existed in manuscript—hymns, sermons, historical treatises, biographies, devotional literature. Among them, from the point of view of literary history, the life stories of Latvian peasants are significant as well as translations from German and English devotional works by such authors as Thomas Wilcox, John Bunyan, Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, and others. During the early nineteenth century, secular literary texts appeared as well, culminating in the 1817 manuscript translation of Friedrich Schiller's *Die Räuber* by a Latvian carpenter Jānis Peitāns (on Moravian literary culture, see Apinis 1987; Boguna et al. 2011).

The two important eighteenth century innovations—the Popular Enlightenment and the Moravian Brethren movement—brought significant new features into Latvian literary culture in terms of content and a communication system. They introduced secular themes into literature, and initiated the appearance of ethnic Latvians as authors. Both trends existed separately in the eighteenth century, but were brought together in the early nineteenth century with the help of Baltic German pastors, who promoted the publication of the first texts written by Latvian peasants.

In 1806, a collection of poems by the blind Latvian tailor Elkaleju Indriķis (also called Neredzīgais Indriķis) was published with the support of the pastor Karl Gotthard Elverfeld. However, an expansion of Latvian authors took place only during the next generation, after the abolishment of serfdom in the provinces of Courland and Livland in 1817 and 1819, respectively. The first ethnic Latvian writers belonged mostly to a rural middle class (they were scribes, teachers, manor or church servants, many of them autodidacts), who overtook the pedagogical agenda of the Popular Enlightenment and the role of the people's intellectual and spiritual leaders. They published their works mainly in the Latvian periodicals that were established after serfdom was abolished—*Latviešu Avīzes* (*Latvian Newspaper*, from 1822) and *Tas Latviešu Ļaužu Draugs* (*The Friend of Latvian People*, from 1832) (Zelče 2009). These neophytes among the Latvians worked hand in hand with Lutheran pastors, faithfully following in their footsteps. The gaining of agency took place without confrontation with the Baltic Germans, but rather as a congenial collaboration that would not have been possible without the support of the pastors. Initially, it was difficult to find any differences in the literary texts written by Baltic Germans and Latvians, and the tradition of the Popular Enlightenment simply seemed to continue (see the survey of the period in Frīde 2011). However, whereas the Popular Enlightenment agenda remained virtually unchanged, the literary praxis took a significant turn from the vertical to the horizontal model of communication. However, there were two trends that made the contribution of Latvian authors distinctive.

The first of these was linked to the transition from the Popular Enlightenment to devotional and religious moral literature along the lines of confessionality and Pietism. The translations of works by the German Catholic priest Christoph Schmid played a prominent role in this transition. The Baltic German pastor Jacob Florentin Lundberg had already translated some of Schmid's works in the 1830s, when the Latvian scribe Ansis Leitāns took over his initiative in the 1840s, and a string of Schmid's translations followed. Two of those, *Genoveva* (1845) and *Eustachius* (1846), most characteristically mark the process that might be described as the reading revolution in Latvian society. At this point, sentimental and melodramatic imagination rather than the rationalism of the Popular Enlightenment seemed to capture readers' interest and helped create the mass phenomenon of a reading craze (Daija 2022).

Secondly, unlike Baltic Germans, Latvian authors tended to put forward the issue of ethnic belonging and national pride. One cannot speak of full-blown national ideology here as the first steps were rather modest. However, the issue of Latvians being not a peasant class but a nation was gradually highlighted, along with the critical evaluation of history. The most striking example here was the assistant teacher and scribe Jānis Ruģēns, who was born into a Moravian Brethren family, and wrote the earliest poem of nationalist sentiment, *Kad atnāks latviešiem tie laiki* (*When will the time for Latvians come*) as well as a subversive historical treatise *Ar acīm redzēts ceļš uz Vidzemes debesīm* (*An Eye-witness way to the heaven of Livland*, 1843). This work that remained in manuscript and circulated among the Moravians was inspired by Garlieb Merkel's polemical essay, *Die Letten* (*The Latvians*, 1796). It connected historical interpretations of the colonization of the Baltic tribes during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries represented by Merkel to a narrative borrowed from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). An astonishing case of merging Enlightenment ideas and Puritan literature, it included one of the first conceptual announcements of national consciousness and opposition to the Baltic Germans (Lejnieks 1939).

At the same time, Baltic German authors tended to coordinate their literary efforts by forming literary societies. After the Courland Society for Literature and Arts (founded in 1814), the Latvian Literary Society (founded 1824) was the most significant organization that put its efforts into the study of the Latvian language and folklore as well as disseminated texts in Latvian written by Baltic Germans (Hehn 1938). With translations of the works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, the tradition of moral didactic literature was supplemented by the notion of aesthetic autonomy. The transitions made in this period – the first half of the nineteenth century – however, did not involve confrontations between conflicting traditions or groups of writers.

III. National ideology takes over

Such a conflict flared up in 1856 when Juris Alunāns, a Latvian student at Tartu University, published his volume of poetry translations, *Dziesmiņas, latviešu valodai pārtulkotas* (*Little songs translated for the Latvian language*; the second part followed in 1867). This publication has been called the starting point of Latvian national literature by scholars of a later generation (Čakars et al. 1987, 168–180). The Baltic German pastor Gustav Brasche in his enraged review of the volume spotted parallels with the movement of *Junges Deutschland* in Germany, thus giving the name of New Latvians to the emerging generation of Latvian writers (Brasche 1856). The publication of the volume also coincided with the formation of a group of nationally minded students at Tartu University that included Juris Alunāns, Krišjānis Valdemārs, and Krišjānis Barons. They were opposed to the literary tradition dominated by Baltic Germans and the previous generation of Latvians, as it was – in the opinion of New Latvians – still oriented only toward the peasants. The *Vormärz* literature and 1848 revolutions in Europe as well as economic reforms in the Baltic provinces provided new grounds for Latvian self-awareness, and nationalist sentiment that appeared marginal in the previous decades now became central. Ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder, among others, played a significant role in this process (Dini 2014, 478; Altmayer, Gūtmanis 1997). The processes in Latvian literature echoed European trends related to the rise of romantic nationalism. The expression of national consciousness was also considered significant in order to liberate themselves from Baltic German patronage. The main goal of the New Latvians was to prove that Latvian literature was capable of the status of “elite culture”, similar to other *Kulturnationen*, an idea that was not shared by Baltic German compatriots (see Ijabs 2014). This challenged the role assumed by the Baltic Germans as cultural donors, and a clash between them and New Latvians became inevitable.

Alunāns explicitly declared his intention to prove that it was possible to express in the Latvian language the same content as in other languages. Hence, the scope of the authors he translated was considerably larger. It included German revolutionary and patriotic poets (Heinrich Heine, Georg Herwegh, Carl Theodor Körner, Friedrich Rückert, Ludwig Uhland), Weimar classicists (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller), German and Russian romanticists (Wilhelm Hauff, Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin, Wilhelm Müller, Nicolaus Lenau, Gavrila Derzhavin, Aleksei Koltsov, Vasili Zhukovsky, Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Pushkin), but also Horace, Ovid, Lucian and a variety of Enlightenment poets. This is an impressive list—it even seems that one can look in vain for a similar compilation in European literature—that has been brought together in order to revolutionize Latvian literary culture (Jansons 1939, 25–150). What these different authors have in common is that the target audience of their works does not consist of predominantly peasants but of educated people. To break away from the synonymy of ‘peasants’ and ‘Latvians’—what the previous generation of authors had not been able to manage—was one of the most significant contributions of the New Latvians. The strategy of Alunāns, who considered translations of world literature to be one of the

principal tools to enter into dialogue with it, was highly appreciated and further developed by intellectuals of the next generation.

In his review, Gustav Brasche warned that the Latvian reading public—used to Popular Enlightenment texts, devotional works and Schmid’s sentimental novels—was not yet ready and mature enough for such reading matter. But that was exactly Alunāns’s point—to demonstrate that Latvian literature could be and must become mature. While this perspective was perceived as revolutionary at the time, it also followed in the footsteps of Popular Enlightenment authors, combining their ideas with national sentiment as well as adding the ideas of a radical enlightenment. This unique combination of moderate and radical wings of the Baltic Enlightenment paved the way for the cultural nationalist movement, exemplified in the new generation Latvian newspapers *Mājas Viesis* (*House Guest*, from 1856) and *Pēterburgas Avīzes* (*St. Petersburg Newspaper*, 1862–1865) (see Apals 2011). In the 1870s these trends established a more mature romantic nationalism in Latvian literature as demonstrated by the poetry of Auseklis and the epic poem “Lāčplēsis” (1888; *The Bear-Slayer*, 1988) by Andrejs Pumpurs that acquired the status of a Latvian national epos. The ideological confrontations with the Baltic Germans became increasingly political, and literature remained an important component of this process. In addition, romantic nationalism was also instrumental in recognizing the significance of Latvian folk poetry and traditional oral culture—not only the movement of folklore collecting expanded, but folklore became an important reference point in the development of Latvian literature (see Pērle-Sīle 2022).

IV. Urban modernity is represented

The third quarter of the nineteenth century can be characterized by a swift expansion of the ideas of romantic nationalism. Correspondingly, a lot of emphasis was put on the social and economic development of the Latvians as well as on the attempts to promote school education, the latter, however, being substantially hampered by the intense Russification, started by the imperial government in the 1880s. Despite this setback, there was constant social mobility among the Latvians that resulted in steadily growing numbers of the urban population. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Latvians already formed the majority among different nationalities living in Riga, the biggest city in the Baltic provinces (Hirschhausen 2006). This development was gradually reflected in literature. Whereas the first two Latvian novels published in 1879, *Mērnieku laiki* (*The Surveyors’ times*) by Reinis and Matīss Kaudzītes, and *Sadzīves viļņi* (*The Waves of everyday life*) by Māteru Juris, still focused on the representation of a rural milieu, based on an earlier literary tradition that matched readers’ expectations, the situation changed significantly in the 1890s, when the first urban novels appeared. This process however, revealed considerable tensions in society. In some texts the city was still represented as a threat to the morality and integrity of the characters, while in others the

authors were able to focus on minute descriptions, characteristic of realist poetics, such as “the assemblage of everyday elements, spatial and temporal determinations that constitute reality and set limits for individual action” (Larsen and Mucignat 2021, 300). The urban novels reflected features of the Latvian public sphere already well established by that time. Two characteristic cases reveal how the modern city was treated in the context of the new possibilities of economic and intellectual development as well as how it was seen from a more critical perspective of the representation of lower social classes.

The first trend is represented by Jānis Poruks’s short partly autobiographical novel, *Pērļu zvejnieks* (*The Fisherman of pearls*, 1894). Its main protagonist starts his life journey in a rural village that, according to the literary critic Guntis Berelis, has traditionally been framed by such principal locations as the peasant manor, the school, the church, and the pub (Berelis 1999, 28). However, in this novel the protagonist moves away to the city, and then goes abroad to gather even more contemporary experience. The portrayal of Riga in Poruks’s novel matches the description of other modern urban milieus with their well-established role as “traditional and artistic human centres, places of art, learning and ideas” (Bradbury 1991, 96). The next step in the life of the protagonist leads him further as he acquires experience as a student at the Dresden Conservatoire. The three main locations of the novel, the local countryside, the city of Riga, and a foreign metropolis point to different stages of the inner development of the main character, while at the same time they also testify to the growing worldliness and expanded opportunities of the young Latvians.

Poruks’s novel was one of the first detailed representations of the bourgeois public sphere in Latvian literature, a significant contribution with literature being considered among “the most important means of socialization, as it was thought to foster the collective internalization of socially important norms” (Jusdanis 1991, 98). It is for this reason that tracing particularities of bourgeois life has often been considered the principal achievement of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century European novel. The advance of naturalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, challenged this perception by breaking significant taboos of the middle-class reading habits that had been cultivating “a complex system of repression that kept the body and the workers below the level of consciousness” (Petrey 1989, 775). This challenge became especially obvious in the case of the French novel with Zola’s fiction from *L’assommoir* (1877) on constantly being accused of indecency.

It is an important testimony to the contemporary relevance of Latvian literature that in the 1890s the representation of the worker’s milieu in the city acquires a significant role in some of the novels. The prime example of this trend is the novel *Zeltenīte* (1896) by Augusts Deglavs, to a large extent based on the experience of the author who upon leaving the countryside worked in the wood industry for several years. The main character of the novel, the seamstress Anna Zeltenīte, experiences a somewhat similar fate when leaving her native farmstead and trying to establish herself in the city. Her life in one of the suburbs, where the workers of neighbouring factories are also dwelling, comes close to a nightmare as the everyday habits of the majority of the people she faces

are far from pleasant, and, according to one critic, Deglavs's narrative is full of "bitterness, blood, and carbon dioxide" (Klaustiņš 1935, 200). Interestingly enough, there are also efforts to bridge the obvious gap between the bourgeois' and the workers' life, which the latter are well aware of. On weekends they dress themselves better and try to behave like decent people of the city centre, before turning back to their usual habits on workdays. The impenetrable borders of the two worlds are underlined by a crucial scene in the novel, when Zeltenīte has to sit for long hours in the waiting room of one of her employers only to be totally humiliated, and then catches cold on her long way back in the cold winter evening that leads to her illness and death. The most important feature of this novel as well as a number of other turn-of-the-century urban texts is the capacity to enter into dialogue with important issues debated by other European literatures.

Conclusion

The processes of Latvian literary culture in the period of about one hundred fifty years traced in this paper reveal significant changes that become obvious by the end of the nineteenth century. The four turning points discussed help to position this development in European contexts. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the texts published in Latvian were mostly authored by Baltic German clergy. On the one hand, this signals affinities with the German-language cultural sphere and, in broader terms, the European Enlightenment. However, the role of Latvians in this process is doubly marginalized. First, this is due to the conscious lowering of the level of conversation by offering texts specifically adapted for peasant audiences; secondly, in addition to the difference among social classes taken into account by the strategies of the Popular Enlightenment in Germany, in the Baltic littoral there is also an unbridgeable ethnic gap between the upper-class Baltic Germans, on the one hand, and the socially lower positioned ethnic Latvians, on the other. Thus the link to the advances of European social and cultural life remains distant and highly selective. Nevertheless, Latvian society was able to capitalize on the eighteenth-century secular turn, and the first manifestation of this was the rise of handwritten literature inspired by the Moravian Brethren movement. Even if these activities were substantially limited and denied publicity in terms of printing their literary efforts, the preserved manuscripts clearly emphasize the rising self-awareness of the Latvians. The romantic nationalism of the mid-nineteenth century marked another principal turning point in making Latvians aware not only of local possibilities, but aspiring toward the most important achievements of European culture. While the focus of the first generation of the New Latvians with their ideas of economic development and social mobility still to a considerable extent relied on the peasants as the core of the emerging new nation, the later trends of the outgoing nineteenth century brought urban modernity into the spotlight. Latvian literature of the 1890s not only focused on the representation of the city but through the topicality of this approach entered the territory of contemporary international debates. With this being accomplished, Latvian literary

culture established itself as a participant in the transformation of society that was taking place on a European scale.

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