

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND AESTHETIC SELF-REFLEXIVENESS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY LATVIAN LITERARY REALISM

Introduction

The nineteenth century was a time of great political, economic, and social upheavals. In the words of Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós,

there is to be noted a breakdown of those ancient social classes forged by history which have been powerful in organization right up to our own times. Common people and aristocracy are both losing their traditional characteristics, on the one hand by the diffusion of wealth, on the other by the progress of education, and the distance we still have to go before the [time when] basic classes losing their physiognomy will be traversed rapidly².

The direction of these changes was determined by the global nature of ongoing transformations variously echoed by different local communities³. Imperial ambitions coexisted with raising the self-awareness of national movements, the latter trying to expand the ranks of their supporters to demonstrate shared concerns and aims that would include previously underrepresented social and ethnic groups⁴. Various forms of art, such as historical painting as well as operas dealing with the national past and mythological motifs, written by such distinguished composers as Verdi, Wagner, Moniuszko, or Smetana, played a significant role in the process of national and social mobilization. The growing role of national movements was manifested in the creation of institutions that set as their task the collection, preservation, and promotion of cultural artefacts. John Neubauer argues that “[i]nstitutionalising literature was a matter of national self-consciousness rather

¹ Acknowledgement: This research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science within the terms and conditions of the project *Reclaiming Latvian Realism: Literary Innovation as Identity Quest* (project no. lzp-2024/1-0341), carried out at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia, Riga.

² Benito Pérez Galdós, “Contemporary Society as Novelistic Material”, in George J. Becker (ed.), *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 149.

³ See Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* [*The Transformation of the World. A History of the 19th Century*], München, Verlag C.H. Beck, 2010; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914*, New York, Vintage Books, 1989; Jörn Leonhard, Ulrike Hirschhausen, *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011.

⁴ See Joep Leerssen, *The National Thought in Europe*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018; Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

than of economics”, and refers to these processes as “textual construction”⁵. An important part of the rising ambitions of local communities was the growing interest in the everyday living conditions of various social strata, and in their representation. In these contexts, vernacular literatures had an important role to play.

This article explores the above issues by tracing the trajectory of nineteenth-century Latvian literature in comparative historical and aesthetic contexts. The investigation focuses on the ways nineteenth-century social changes preconditioned the importance of literature and literary communication more generally, on the relevance of literary realism and its themes, as well as its poetic innovations, and on the role realist literary efforts played in stimulating the self-reflexiveness of literature in response to the challenges of modernity.

The Importance and Legitimacy of Nineteenth-century Literature

One of the most significant factors in the transition from eighteenth to nineteenth century culture was the secularization of literature. This was especially acute for societies supposedly finding themselves on the periphery or semi-periphery of the European literary system⁶. The Latvian example is a case in point here. The beginnings of secular literature in the Latvian language are placed in the second half of the eighteenth century. Literary developments at the time were shaped by the so-called Popular Enlightenment, with its roots in German literary culture and aimed at peasant education⁷. However, communication models differed when transferred from ethnically German lands to the Baltic provinces where, despite the political rule of the Russian Empire established in the eighteenth century, the economic and cultural dominance of the Baltic Germans remained largely intact. Thus, the educational tasks set by the Popular Enlightenment in the Baltic provinces were aimed at the ethnically different Latvian peasants, who did not speak the language of the educators. In their turn, Baltic German pastors and *literati* were not native speakers of Latvian. For these reasons, the Latvian-language texts they created had relatively restricted aims and primarily practical purposes. The main outcomes of the Popular Enlightenment were nevertheless important, while reading secular texts was considered potentially valuable and was gradually accepted among the peasants.

⁵ John Neubauer, “General Introduction”, in Marcel Cornis-Pope, John Neubauer (eds.), *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe. Junctions and Disjunctions in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. III: *The Making and Remaking of Literary Institutions*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007, p. 2.

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004; Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 2004.

⁷ Pauls Daija, *Literary History and Popular Enlightenment in Latvian Culture*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

Another important factor that, alongside the secularization of literature, started to change reading habits, was the growing literacy of the Latvian population. This created preconditions for the gradual strengthening of the public sphere⁸. The first calendars in the Latvian language appeared in the late eighteenth century, and their popularity grew swiftly. The first newspaper in Latvian, *Latviešu Avīzes* [*Latvian Newspaper*], was initiated in 1822 by a group of Baltic German intellectuals who were also the founders of the so-called *Lettisch-literarische Gesellschaft* [*Latvian Literary Society*], established in 1824⁹. The declared undertaking of the Society was to provide the local population with more information and secular literary texts that considered the needs of education and pleasure¹⁰. A combination of moral lesson and curiosity as motivation for reading remained intact in the Latvian public sphere for a considerable time. The rules of the market also played a significant role, especially regarding the emergence of new publishers as the competition in this field was constantly growing. Publications of so-called popular literature became widespread, leading to the publication of the first best-selling books in the Latvian language¹¹. Despite the sometimes dubious literary quality of these texts, it is nevertheless vital to see the secularization of literature and the growing readership as two sides of the same coin.

A qualitatively new step was taken by the generation of so-called New Latvians who commenced their activities in the 1850s. The New Latvians, who had a wide range of aims including political and economic advances of the Latvian population, were keen to address their compatriots and to promote new ideas through different media, including the publication of a radical weekly, *Pēterburgas Avīzes* [*St. Petersburg Newspaper*], from 1862 to 1865¹². Already in the 1850s, when this group of people met for the first time at the University of Tartu (then Dorpat) in Estonia, they looked at literary publications as an important part of carrying out their ideological programme. The most radical of their demands, leading to severe conflicts with the Baltic German intellectuals, was that of

⁸ Aiga Šemeta, "The Media History of the Early Periodical Press in Latvia", in Pauls Daija, Benedikts Kalnačs (eds.), *A New History of Latvian Literature: The Long Nineteenth Century*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 57-63.

⁹ Māra Grudule, Benedikts Kalnačs, "Introduction: An Outline of the Political and Cultural Development of Latvia", in Liisa Steinby, Benedikts Kalnačs, Mikhail Oshukov, Viola Parente-Čapková (eds.), *The Politics of Literary History. Literary Historiography in Russia, Latvia, the Czech Republic and Finland after 1990*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, p. 148.

¹⁰ Pauls Daija, "Baltic German Literary Societies", in Daija, Kalnačs (eds.), *A New History of Latvian Literature*, pp. 36-45.

¹¹ Lidijs Limane, "Garais lasīšanas gadsimts. Daži grāmatu lasīšanas aspekti 19. gadsimtā" ["The Long Century of Reading. Some Aspects of Book Reading in the 19th Century"], in Maija Treile (ed.), *Lasīšanas pandēmija: esejas par lasīšanas vēsturi Latvijā* [*The Reading Pandemic. Essays on the History of Reading in Latvia*], Rīga, Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2020, p. 88.

¹² Gints Apals, *Pēterburgas Avīzes. Latviešu pirmā saskare ar Eiropas politiskajām idejām* [*St. Petersburg Newspaper. The First Latvian Contacts with European Political Ideas*], Rīga, Zvaigzne ABC, 2011.

creating a Latvian elite culture¹³. However, if we look at the literary activities the New Latvians initiated, alongside other aims such as the promotion of significant social and economic reforms, it is striking that publications with the rather modest aims of providing light entertainment could peacefully co-exist with declarations of the need to significantly raise the quality of Latvian letters. These two trends find their early examples in Krišjānis Valdemārs's story collection, *300 stāsti* [300 Stories] (1853), and Juris Alunāns's translated poetry volume, *Dziesmiņas, latviešu valodai pārtulkotas* [Little Songs, Translated for the Latvian Language] (1856), respectively. While Valdemārs, uncompromising in terms of economic development, still considered the Latvian public as having rather limited literary interests, Alunāns' volume of translations of both ancient and modern poetry, which included some of the most radical nineteenth-century German authors, provided a challenge not only to the Baltic German community that found these texts unsuited for the Latvian readership, but also for the intended readers themselves. In terms of sold copies, *Dziesmiņas* obviously could not achieve commercial success, even though in retrospect this publication has been considered a turning point in the development of Latvian letters. Nevertheless, regarding the versatility of literary trends, it was the impact of both elite and popular culture that significantly shaped nineteenth-century reading habits at a time when the difference between these two types of cultural production was less pronounced.

Such difference, on the other hand, was important for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as he developed his vision of world literature. Theo D'haen comments that, for Goethe, the concept of world literature

assumes the double guise of on the one hand signalling, positively, the intimate "commerce" or exchange of ideas between like-minded writers across Europe, and on the other hand, negatively, that of the ever faster and ever-increasing commercialization, including in the province of "letters", that Goethe saw taking place all around him¹⁴.

Being more peripheral, and small in terms of readers, nineteenth-century Latvian literature could not yet make a division between the two realms but rather tried to benefit from both. This pattern was not unusual; for related reasons it was, in fact, familiar elsewhere in Central Europe.

The most important aspect in establishing the legitimacy of literary efforts was a conscious approach to the building of a literary community. Marko Juvan observes this regarding the development of nineteenth-century Slovenian literature and points to the role played by philologist Matija Čop and poet France Prešeren who "endeavored to place world literature in the emerging Slovenian literary

¹³ Ivars Ijabs, "Another Baltic Postcolonialism: Young Latvians, Baltic Germans, and the Emergence of Latvian National Movement", *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 42, 2013, 1, pp. 88-107.

¹⁴ Theo D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 2024, p. 8.

system, even as they also attempted – at least at the level of aesthetic and imaginative potentialities – to include domestic literature in the world literary system”¹⁵. These aims were shared by other Central European cultures that, despite their innovations, for reasons of historical and social inequality could not quite match the level of distribution of English or French literature. Tomasz Bilczewski, Stanley Bill, and Magdalena Popiel justly state that the long-term goal of scholarly efforts should be to demonstrate how (in their example) Polish literature “has always belonged to the global currents of ‘world literature’”. The latter claim is not to deny that such currents have often been asymmetrical, subject to the operations of cultural and political power”¹⁶. Belonging to both local and world literary systems through their efforts of reception and interpretation, on one hand, and looking for their own voice and innovation, on the other, has been significant for East-Central European literatures.

Realist Issues in Nineteenth-Century Literature

While significant differences remained, the nineteenth century nevertheless showed a tendency toward synchronization in the development of European literary cultures. This meant above all raising the level of originality of literary production in various parts of Europe. In preceding centuries, the most important cultural trends such as the Baroque or the Enlightenment had already reached out to literary peripheries (even if not necessarily providing sufficient foundation for creating texts in the vernacular), but this communication often worked at the level of appropriation and imitation. In the nineteenth century, however, local literary trends started to catch up with European developments in a much shorter time, with authors being able to participate in or at least follow an ongoing exchange of opinions. For Polish and Slovenian literatures, this was arguably the case already in the period of Romanticism. In the case of other, more oppressed cultures, such as the Lithuanian one, the synchronization with European trends was even more difficult and could depend on the author’s intuition. Regarding the topic of arranged marriages versus marriages for love in the late nineteenth-century prose by the Lithuanian author Žemaitė, Violeta Kelertas observes: “Using only her feelings and experiences, relying on her acute observational powers, she captured the zeitgeist and verbalized the solution that she intuited on her own far from any centers of culture and influence”¹⁷. Thus, in the last decades of the nineteenth

¹⁵ Marko Juvan, “World Literature in Carniola”, *Interlitteraria*, 2012, 17, p. 28.

¹⁶ Tomasz Bilczewski, Stanley Bill, Magdalena Popiel, “Introduction: Polish Literature and Its Worlds”, in Tomasz Bilczewski, Stanley Bill, Magdalena Popiel (eds.), *The Routledge World Companion to Polish Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 4.

¹⁷ Violeta Kelertas, “Introduction”, in Žemaitė, *Marriage for Love. A 19th Century Lithuanian Woman’s Fight for Justice*. Translated by Violeta Kelertas and Maryte Racys, Los Angeles, Birchwood Press, 2020, p. 11.

century, the rising vernacular cultures were, in different ways, getting more and more up to speed with the Western European trends. In this process, realism had a prominent role to play.

By the time Latvian literature was heading toward maturity, realist literary efforts had already been well developed, even sophisticated, in many parts of Europe. This was not only the case of French or English literature but also, for example, of Polish culture. Important social factors, such as the defeat of the 1863 uprising in the Russian Empire, initiated a more pragmatic approach to the continuing social struggle as well as influencing the positivist trend (an analogue to realism) in Polish literature. Characteristically, some of those in the positivist camp used elements of popular literature in their representational strategies. Such was the case of Henrik Sienkiewicz, who turned from contemporary social criticism to the genre of the historical novel, enjoying great success and popularity¹⁸. Sienkiewicz's approach corresponded to similar strategies of the generation of the New Latvians and their followers. In the case of nineteenth-century Latvian literature, the mixture of sentimentalism and realism remained present and, in the given contexts, can largely be considered productive.

The specific features of Latvian realism can be partially explained by the impact of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German literary trends that Latvian authors often considered to be their models. In his analysis of Friedrich Schiller's domestic tragedy *Kabale und Liebe* [*Intrigue and Love*] (1784), Erich Auerbach argues:

In the Germany of those days, the revolt against the classicistic and rationalistic taste of France was also carried further than anywhere else. In the process the thing we call separation of styles, the exclusion of realism from high tragedy, was overcome, and this is a basic prerequisite both for a historical and for a contemporary realism of tragic dimensions. And yet at least the second of these, contemporary realism, did not achieve complete development¹⁹.

More recent research pays attention to the presence of marginalized shorter forms in the German literary tradition, with the authors often turning "these short forms into catalysts of literary modernity after the demise of the old hierarchical system of genres in the later eighteenth century"²⁰. Stimulated by the recognition that the separation of styles was outdated, the growing multiplicity of genres was instrumental for introducing realist poetics, in various ways and alongside the

¹⁸ Monika Woźniak, "Toward Mass Culture: The Global Renown of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*", in Bilczewski, Bill, Popiel (eds.), *The Routledge World Companion*, p. 173.

¹⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 444.

²⁰ Dirk Göttsche et al., "Routes into Realism. Multiple Beginnings, Shared Catalysts, Transformative Dynamics", in Dirk Göttsche, Rosa Mucignat, Robert Weninger (eds.), *Landscapes of Realism. Rethinking Literary Realism in Comparative Perspectives*, vol. I: *Mapping Realism*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2021, p. 143.

impact of other trends such as sentimentalism. Looking at the complexity of ongoing aesthetic processes elsewhere, nineteenth-century Latvian literature tried to employ various stylistic approaches to communicate its messages to different groups of a potentially interested readership.

By the late 1880s realism had reached sufficient prestige as an innovative trend in contemporary European letters for Latvian authors to be eager to follow. The substantial changes inspired by realist texts included the turn toward the representation of everyday experience. The realist gaze consciously touched on those areas of life and social circles that had remained underrepresented, or were considered to be worth characterization only in lower literary genres, such as comedies. One of the landmarks of realist literature became “a new valuation of ordinary experience and its ordinary settings and things”²¹. Contrary to normative poetics with its emphasis on decorum, the realist approach significantly broadened the aesthetic scope. The presence of bourgeois or middle-class characters was already noticeable in eighteenth-century novel and drama, defined by Denis Diderot as the midway genre of dramaturgy with serious content. As Eric Bentley writes:

The story begins with the establishment in the early eighteenth century of a genre midway between the older tragedy and comedy, a genre that was called *tragédie bourgeoise* – “bourgeois tragedy” – when it tended toward tragedy, and *comédie larmoyante* – “tearful comedy” – when it tended toward comedy²².

These aesthetic tensions and interrelated generic moves remained intact throughout the nineteenth century. Realist aspects were developed in different forms by constant efforts of minute observation of the everyday experience of characters from different social milieus.

These changes contributed to the understanding of “the importance of making characters comparable to their supposed readers”²³. This led not only to the growing impact of middle-class drama but also to a cross-sectional depiction of society in its totality in nineteenth-century realist and naturalist prose and dramaturgy. For Latvian authors, this shift in representation strategies opened the possibility of dealing seriously with socially lower strata of peasants and workers. Up to the 1860s, these groups were either shown with the purpose of providing a moral message, as in the concept of an “ideal peasant”²⁴ developed by Baltic Germans writing in Latvian, or marginalized, as in the German language novels and stories where the indigenous population was depicted, if at all, in anecdotal

²¹ Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 7.

²² Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, San Diego, New York, London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1987, p. 46.

²³ Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 5.

²⁴ Daija, *Literary History*, pp. 77-104.

scenes taking place on the periphery of the main events²⁵. Quite to the contrary, Latvian realist authors place these people at the centre of their fiction, thus substantially changing the contemporary literary scene. Consequently, a certain tension arose between their literary inspiration, taken from high culture such as the Enlightenment drama, and close observation of the everyday.

Compared to economically more advanced societies, an important aspect of nineteenth-century Latvian realism was the attention paid to social mobility and transformation in rural areas. Whereas, considering the French realist literature of the period, it is possible to argue that realist interests were predominantly linked to urban centres²⁶, in various other cases, such as Scandinavian, Polish, or Russian literatures things were different. At the same time, however, there were shared features. Perhaps the most important of those was the feeling of transformation, including swift economic changes that consciously or unconsciously affected the traditional way of life in the countryside. As Peter Brooks states, “[i]t is in particular the movement from country to city that might be said to trigger the realist impulse”²⁷. This observation also fits the cases when people did not undertake any moves, but stayed in their traditional milieus. The difference from earlier ways of life, however, was marked by the inevitable impact of growing social tensions and economic changes. The Danish critic Georg Brandes argued this regarding the situation of Scandinavian literatures in his inaugural lecture at the Copenhagen University in the early 1870s, claiming that radical innovation should become the utmost priority for contemporary writers²⁸. Small literatures such as the Danish – and Scandinavian ones in general – had to maintain their specificity and to address local readers while at the same time getting inspiration from the most topical literary trends. To achieve these tasks, an intellectual effort was necessary, as well as an acute sense of how ordinary people could be represented.

This led to important poetic changes, as Pam Morris shows by pointing to such significant aesthetic effects as the empirical effect and the truth effect at the core of the realist form²⁹. While the link to aesthetic traditions still played a considerable role, the specificity of details as opposed to the universalizing approach of the Enlightenment was among the principal innovations of realist literature. New trends were inspired both from above and from below, as David Damrosch shows in his analysis of the related viewpoints and aesthetic demands made by the

²⁵ Benedikts Kalnačs, “The Genesis, Ideology and Poetics of Nineteenth-Century Latvian Novels”, in Daija, Kalnačs (eds.), *A New History of Latvian Literature*, pp. 152-157.

²⁶ Brooks, *Realist Vision*, p. 131.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

²⁸ Dan Ringgaard, Mats Rosenthal Thomsen, “Introduction: Danish Literature as World Literature”, in Dan Ringgaard, Mats Rosenthal Thomsen (eds.), *Danish Literature as World Literature*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 3.

²⁹ Pam Morris, *Realism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 101-113.

aristocratically minded Madame de Staël, on one hand, and the democratically inclined Johann Gottfried Herder, on the other³⁰.

Tensions in approaching nineteenth-century literature marked a move toward the diversity of literary fields across Europe. One of the principal contributions of realism was the openness of poetic expression as authors opted “to reconsider realist form not as yet another rule-based structure, but rather as an ongoing process of formal innovation through which authors seek to capture the ever changing sense of reality”³¹. The dynamics of form was inspired by the growing interconnectedness of various social strata as well as by nineteenth-century reading practices. As literary texts were often first serialized in newspapers and literary magazines, this contributed to the fragmentation of composition and structure due to the publication of the parts of larger texts in separate instalments. The elaboration of characters and plots in realist fiction could accordingly be advanced and modified in response to readers’ perception of the already published parts. Social contexts could thus have a direct influence on the concepts developed by writers who, as in the case of Balzac, had “the ambition to offer a detailed representation of an entire society”³². Without necessarily setting themselves the aim to reach a scale of interpretation comparable to the French writer’s achievements, for realist authors, delving into consideration of the driving forces of the social fabric as well as into the motivations of individual actions and decisions reflected their consciousness of the changing tasks in terms of both content and poetic expression of their work.

The “Self-reflexiveness” of Latvian Realist Literature. The Case of Rūdolfs Blaumanis

In their investigation of the dynamics of realist forms, Steen Bille Jørgensen and Margaret R. Higonnet pay special attention to two important notions, the “composition” of a literary text, and the “self-reflexiveness” of the authors’ approaches to the represented reality. They take the position that self-reflexiveness

evokes a notion of form as an open process unfolding in the work as an attempt to give shape to reality without stable contours or meaning. Form as a process of self-reflexiveness embraces the textual dynamism of the entire work with regard to its setting, characters, themes and composition³³.

³⁰ David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2020.

³¹ Steen Bille Jørgensen, Margaret R. Higonnet, “Dynamics of Realist Forms”, in Svend Erik Larsen, Steen Bille Jørgensen, Margaret R. Higonnet (eds.), *Landscapes of Realism. Rethinking Literary Realism in Comparative Perspectives*, vol. II: *Pathways through Realism*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2022, pp. 368-369.

³² Thomas Pavel, Galin Tihanov, “What is Realism? Ideas and Debates”, in Götsche, Mucignat, Weninger (eds.), *Landscapes of Realism*, p. 45.

³³ Jørgensen, Higonnet, “Dynamics of Realist Forms”, p. 369.

This includes the growing subjectivity of fiction, manifested both as an attempt by the authors to let their characters speak, as well as the necessity to develop a deeply personal emotional involvement. As Flaubert writes, “exterior reality must penetrate us, almost make us cry out with it, if we are to reproduce it well”³⁴. The double role, that of narrator and character, assumed by the author, opened the way to such formal experiments as free indirect discourse. In elaborating his prose style, Flaubert was keen to preserve a certain indirectness, not revealing his intentions fully, but rather asking the reader to contribute to the creation of meaning. From this perspective, Flaubert criticized the prefaces to Emile Zola’s works considering them too direct in postulating the author’s viewpoint³⁵. Flaubert recognized that the self-reflexiveness of an author could be shown in various ways. On appropriate occasions it might be voiced in different paratexts widespread in nineteenth-century literary culture, but preferably it could be integrated in the literary structure itself.

In what follows, I will trace some of the literary practices of nineteenth-century Latvian realist author Rūdolfs Blaumanis, considered one of the most important turn-of-the-century Latvian writers. More to the point, I will examine Blaumanis’s take on “self-reflexiveness” in some of his prose and drama texts.

In the context of late nineteenth-century Latvian literature, Blaumanis differed significantly from most of his contemporaries. While looking at the same rural milieus as many of his colleagues, and describing the life of ordinary peasants as well as servants of the landlords’ manors, Blaumanis provided a much more complex aesthetic perspective in his novellas and plays. Through his narrative techniques as well as through character constellations in his dramaturgy, he was able to combine a direct involvement, looking at the events from the persons’ perspective, while also employing tools of estrangement that allowed for distance and self-reflexiveness.

Blaumanis’ poetic intentions were only seldom outspoken, and in those cases mostly in his literary and theatre criticism. His occasional theoretical remarks testify to his profound knowledge of the contemporary art scene that helped pursue his aims. Social and cultural contexts implicated in literary works provide important clues to his aspirations, and the analysis of poetic form helps to explain these in more detail. As for many of his Latvian contemporaries, of special importance for Blaumanis were German literary models. He considered Goethe one of the principal influences when evaluating the literary tradition. He admired Nietzsche as one of the most radical thinkers of the late nineteenth century, and followed the efforts of many German language realist writers such as Peter Rosegger, Ludwig Anzengruber, Gottfried Keller, Theodor Storm, Gerhart

³⁴ Gustave Flaubert, “On Realism”, in George J. Becker (ed.), *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 93.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

Hauptmann, and Herman Sudermann with great interest. When evaluating the complex and multi-layered poetics of Blaumanis, it is important to examine these stylistically heterogeneous and diverse inspirations, coming from literary contributions of different quality. At the early stages in his career, Blaumanis also wrote in German, and his efforts were intended to address educated readers³⁶.

To begin with his prose, late nineteenth-century Latvian literary contexts help to explain why the novella became the most characteristic genre for Blaumanis, who never attempted to write a novel. In practical terms, his constant employment as a journalist never allowed him to concentrate on his literary works for longer and uninterrupted periods of time. Thus, Blaumanis needed to be satisfied with brief spells of intense writing, and preferred shorter forms of fiction. This was a characteristic feature of Latvian letters, as the first Latvian novels appeared only in 1879³⁷. Importantly for Blaumanis, however, this also became an issue of evaluating the most appropriate scale for a literary text, a subject of consideration in European realism at the time³⁸. This is already obvious in his first published work, the short German-language *Skizze* (sketch) *Wiedergefunden* [*Found Again*] (1882), a reflection on an artist who has returned home after a period of travel.

In the 1890s, when Latvian novel writing was finally gaining pace, in many parts of Europe the most important period of the realist novel had already passed its peak. Blaumanis felt that his exploits of the novella genre and other short forms were well suited to satisfy impatient readers already used to modern living conditions, while at the same time still developing their skills of grasping the more sophisticated details of literary texts. His approach had a lot in common with that of many contemporary authors who, in their attempts, “began more systematically to reconsider literary form as a way to affect readers, for some in order to cater to the popular aesthetic taste, for others to influence them worldwide, and for many realist writers to do both”³⁹.

Regarding links to German literary trends, a characteristic example is provided by Blaumanis’s novella *Romeo un Jūlija* [*Romeo and Juliet*] (1897). It is written in the tradition of Neo-Renaissance literature trending in Germany in the last quarter of the nineteenth century⁴⁰. Contrary to the prevailing models of relocating events

³⁶ Benedikts Kalnačs, Rolf Füllmann, “Der lettische Schriftsteller Rūdolfs Blaumanis um 1900: Tradition, Symbolismus und Revolution” [“The Latvian Writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis around 1900: Tradition, Symbolism, and Revolution”], in Agnese Dubova, Ineta Balode, Konrad Schröder (eds.), *Sprach- und Kulturkontakte im Ostseeraum* [*Linguistic and Cultural Contacts in the Baltic Sea Region*], Bamberg, University of Bamberg Press, 2022, p. 252.

³⁷ Kalnačs, “The Genesis, Ideology and Poetics”, pp. 157-162.

³⁸ Jørgensen, Higonnet, “Dynamics of Realist Forms”, pp. 434-435.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 397.

⁴⁰ See Rolf Füllmann, *Die Novelle der Neorenaissance zwischen “Gründerzeit” und “Untergang” (1870–1945): Reflexionen im Rückspiegel* [*The Novella of the Neo-Renaissance between the “Founding Era” and “Downfall” (1870–1945): Reflections in the Rearview Mirror*], Marburg, Tectum Verlag, 2016.

to earlier centuries, Blaumanis picked up and elaborated the topic of two hostile families leading to the tragedy of their children within the Latvian peasant milieu. He drew inspiration from Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and the nineteenth-century novella *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* [*A Village Romeo and Juliet*] (1855) by the German language Swiss author Gottfried Keller. However, there are several differences from Keller's approach. Thus, contrary to the omnipresent narrator of Keller's novella, Blaumanis' narration works on the level of the protagonists, mostly looking at the events from their perspective. At the same time, the author's implicit comments allow for an alienated view with sharp-eyed observations of the Latvian peasant milieu. Specific details include the relatively advanced age of the protagonists who had not been allowed to settle their own lives. An important addition to the conflict is the implication of the potential incest in the relations of the protagonists, which eventually leads to their intended double suicide. This might be considered as an indication of the limited conditions in which they live. However, in Blaumanis' novella the truth of their parents' claim, intended to prevent the potential marriage, is never confirmed. Indecisiveness remains a significant aspect of the narrative strategy.

Another example of self-reflexiveness in Blaumanis' fiction is his novella *Baltais* [*The White One*] (1896). Here, the story is told by an artist who, upon his short-term visit home after graduating from the Art Academy in St. Petersburg, encounters a young farmhand who catches his interest and whom the artist wants to portray. The exchange of opinions between the two men reveals their different characters and signals the gap regarding their different experiences and world views.

The character of the artist in the novella was inspired by Blaumanis' friend, the young Latvian painter Janis Rozentāls. Among the most intriguing aspects of this work are those provided by the contexts of its creation and publication. *Baltais* was printed in the fall of 1896, at the time when there was a Latvian ethnographic exhibition in Riga, featuring important achievements in all spheres of life. This exhibition became hugely popular and well-attended. There was also widespread enthusiasm in broad circles of the local population already during the period of preparations, when people were asked to participate with available information and artefacts, and indeed many got involved. At the same time, however, there were disagreements as to what priorities should be set. Specific contexts were also provided by this exhibition being an integral part of the Tenth All-Russian Archaeological Congress, which revealed an implicit orientalist dimension. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward W. Said comments on the popular nineteenth-century "universal" exhibitions that "routinely contained models of colonial villages, towns, courts, and the like [...]. These subaltern cultures were exhibited before Westerners as microcosms of the larger imperial domain"⁴¹. Such contexts

⁴¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 112.

could, in the case of the Latvian intellectual community, contribute to the feeling of alienation, and it certainly provided the whole undertaking with a double meaning. For example, the artist Rozentāls, featured in Blaumanis' novella, was among the organizers of the exhibition. At the same time, he could perceive the distance between his own understanding of the principles of modern art, on one hand, and the artefacts of the traditional way of peasant life featured by the exhibition, on the other. To a considerable extent, Blaumanis' narrative in *Baltais* draws on such inner tensions which the writer not only projects into the character of the artist, who is also the first-person narrator of the novella, but also, by extension, recognizes as personally experienced. An implicit internal dialogue between the academically educated and self-assured Rozentāls, and Blaumanis, whose education only included a German-language commercial school in Riga (and who, despite the good foundation of his knowledge, was always at pains to broaden his knowledge), was also at play here. Arguably, Blaumanis, who continued to live alternatively in Riga and at his familial farmstead *Braki*, still felt close to peasant life, while considering it from a distant perspective. The contrast between the setting of the events in his novella, and the broader contexts of the Ethnographic Exhibition that took place in Riga, are also markers of this duality.

In Blaumanis' dramaturgy, the duality between the traditional and the modern way of life on the poetic level is expressed through the constantly employed motif of return, which is employed in his dramas as well as in his comedies. Throughout the history of dramaturgy, the return (or arrival) of an important character had been adapted as a technical device, helping to introduce the situation and providing the principal figure with an opportunity to evaluate earlier events anew. Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* (1601) is among well-known examples of this approach. In the nineteenth century, Ibsen carefully elaborated the so-called retrospective technique in his family dramas such as *Gengangere* [*Ghosts*] (1881). Blaumanis followed in these footsteps while focusing on the Latvian peasant milieu.

In Blaumanis' first play, *Zagli* [*The Robbers*] (1890), two of the protagonists return to their native region from the Russian mainland where, as was a familiar nineteenth-century trend, they had acquired land in the hope of achieving more prosperous living conditions. The comic situations in the play are partly based on the inability of their former neighbours to recognize them. However, larger issues at stake are the rather painful experience of the two men regarding their emigration, as well as the inevitable differences created by their prolonged absence. The experience of being away from the familiar living space allows some deliberation concerning the traditional and seemingly well-known milieu, which leads to seeing it in a new light.

In another comedy, *Ļaunais gars* [*The Evil Spirit*] (1891), even a short-term absence is working in the same direction. A peasant couple has had the luck of winning a huge amount of money in a lottery. During the husband's trip to the city to collect their gain, the mistress of the farm organizes a party during which the consciousness of her newly acquired wealth leads to her sense of superiority and

causes immediate disputes with relatives and neighbours. On the return of the husband, however, it turns out that the supposedly winning number was printed in the newspaper by mistake. The sudden crush of ambitions allows the husband to take notice of his usual milieu in a new light that motivates him, and subsequently also his wife, to reconsider their true values, while abandoning their air of superiority. In his later play, *Skroderdienas Silmačos* [*Tailor-Days in Silmači*] (1905), Blaumanis used the figure of a traveling tailor to reevaluate the relations within a farmstead, solving all misunderstandings by the end of the play.

More complex cases are provided by Blaumanis' dramas; I wish to comment on two of them. As was the case with *Romeo un Jūlija*, discussed above, in his literary works Blaumanis employed motives that had long-established roots in European culture, providing them with new meanings. Yet another such example is his drama *Pazudušais dēls* [*The Prodigal Son*] (1893), which traces the tragic story of a young man, Krustiņš, raised on his parents' farm but growing gradually impatient with the living conditions there, even though he is unable to find an escape route. This leads him to a more and more frivolous life that eventually derails Krustiņš during the prolonged absence of his father, who needs treatment in the city hospital. During this time, Krustiņš falls into debt and is unable to pay the annual rent on the farm. On his return, the father not only notices these problems, but also sees the issues his son has been struggling with in a new light, and recognizes that these had to have been caused to a considerable extent by the isolation in a remote farmstead, with little echo of the contemporary social transformations.

However, all attempts to find an escape route are doomed to failure while the amount of debt which Krustiņš is not ready to reveal to his father already appears too large to be paid. An ill-advised attempt to steal some money from his father's closet to try his luck at gambling leads to the catastrophic final scene of the play, when Krustiņš's robbery is discovered and he is shot dead by his father. Importantly, although this appears to be too late, an evaluation of earlier events triggered in the play by the father's absence and by his return is important for the implicit self-reflexiveness of this drama on the level of both character and plot elaboration⁴².

Another example of the broad perspective Blaumanis was looking for in his dramas was his interpretation of the storyline reflecting the fate of Potiphar's wife, featured in the Bible (Genesis 39: 1-23). This story was used as an indirect allusion in the title and the plot of Blaumanis' drama *Potivāra nams* [*Potiphar's House*] (1897). Dealing with the subject of marital infidelity, and preserving the traditional milieu of the countryside, the difference of this drama compared to other plays by Blaumanis was provided by its geographical scope introduced through one of its

⁴² Benedikts Kalnačs, "The Blaumanis Moment: National Literature Enters the Stage of Art", *Interlitteraria*, 2012, 17, pp. 318-326.

protagonists, Ringolts, who, as a result of his travels, has acquired significant wealth and experience.

The events of the play unfold, characteristically, on Ringolts' return to his brother's country house following a long absence. Fresh insights help Ringolts to notice his brother Matīss's problematic situation in his marriage to a younger and lustful woman. Ringolts undertakes an effort to raise his brother's awareness of the problem. Even if these efforts are initially met with a passionate resistance, Matīss finally recognizes the accuracy of Ringolts' observations. As the action unfolds, Matīss separates from his wife, leaves his estate, and, with the support of Ringolts, finds peace of mind in a remote and idyllic foreign location, even though he is still longing to return home. What Matīss gains from this experience is the capacity of a critical evaluation of the conditions of his family life. Despite this acknowledgement of a relatively narrow segment of reality, and revealed partly with the help of melodramatic imagination often exploited in popular theatre throughout the nineteenth century⁴³, Blaumanis once again employs the double perspective of the local and the global, of the immersion of persons in unfolding events and a distanced look at them.

Blaumanis himself was not a frequent traveller. Only at the age of nearly forty did he, in 1901, take up a post as one of the editors of a Latvian language newspaper published in St. Petersburg, for several years. Still, he benefited from the evolving genre of travel writing that had started gaining ground in the Latvian public sphere. He communicated with a lot of people who had sufficient travel experience. His interest in meeting people from different backgrounds grew from his reading, conversations and reflections. The recognition of the importance of such contacts also helped to portray human character more convincingly and to provide various perspectives on the same events. Starting with the observation of local people, Blaumanis developed insights into broader patterns of human encounters in his literary texts, where he revealed an excellent knowledge of everyday habits and personal relations.

Conclusion

In 1855, Charles Baudelaire wrote a long review of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, in which he stated:

There can be few occupations so interesting, so attractive, so full of surprises and revelations for a critic, a dreamer whose mind is given to generalization as well as to

⁴³ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995.

the study of details – or, to put it even better, to the idea of a universal order and hierarchy – as a comparison of the nations and their respective products⁴⁴.

The writer further dealt with the concept of hierarchy but the tone of his review was most appreciative of cultural varieties pointing to “their *equal* utility”⁴⁵. The freshness of Baudelaire’s insights, alongside the depth of his intellectual observations, suggests a comparison with the way Blaumanis approached the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition in 1896. To him the exhibits he saw there were familiar and distant at the same time, just as in his art he relied on a detailed knowledge of the ordinary, but also developed his poetic insights by including the inspiration he got from other literatures. To some extent, Blaumanis’ search for the poetics of literary form was close to that of a comparatist, “[p]ursuing similarity, but using similarity as a starting point for discovering what is different”⁴⁶. César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Dario Villanueva further specify their take on the issue of ethnography:

Some ethnographic collections are organized by geographical area [...]. But some collections [...] are organized by task. In one area the visitor can examine dozens of types of small boats from different cultures. In another, dozens of scythes, spinning-wheels, or shoes. The needs, we see, are more or less the same, but they are satisfied using different materials, employing different tools and techniques, under different conditions of use⁴⁷.

Nineteenth-century literature was, arguably, also organized by tasks. Those can be defined as the necessity to legitimize literary efforts, to pay attention to previously underrepresented spheres of experience such as the ordinary, to look for and find an adequate poetic form, and to make literary texts be both attractive and serious intellectual work, resulting in self-reflexiveness stimulated by writing and reading alike. The spread of these efforts across territories created the basis for the concept of world literature. It led to the intense circulation of ideas and literary texts either in translation or in languages immediately accessible for the local readership and beyond. The “new, truly secular”⁴⁸ approach to representing the ordinary helped to create a shared basis of experience across societies and cultures. From this perspective, each literary system that was going to be created intersected with others that kept looking for similar issues while overcoming the persistent feelings

⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, “Critical Method – on the Modern Idea of Progress as Applied to the Fine Arts”, in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (eds.), *Art in Theory 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p. 485.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 485. Baudelaire’s emphasis.

⁴⁶ César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, Darío Villanueva, *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications*, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁴⁸ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, London and New York, Verso, 2014, p. 75.

of belatedness regarding the position of small and peripheral cultures⁴⁹. Through their efforts, Latvian realist authors contributed to the intellectual and aesthetic diversity and growing self-reflexiveness of nineteenth-century literature.

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⁴⁹ Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Change: Inventing National Literature*, Minneapolis and Oxford, University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

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THE HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND AESTHETIC SELF-REFLEXIVENESS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY LATVIAN LITERARY REALISM

(Abstract)

This article traces the trajectory of nineteenth-century Latvian literature in comparative historical and aesthetic contexts. The investigation focuses on the ways nineteenth-century social changes preconditioned the importance of literature and literary communication more generally, on the relevance of literary realism and its thematic as well as poetic innovations, and on the role realist literary efforts played in stimulating the self-reflexiveness of literature in response to the challenges of modernity. The main tasks of nineteenth-century literature can be defined as the necessity to legitimize literary efforts, to pay attention to previously underrepresented spheres of experience such as the ordinary, to look for and find an adequate poetic form, and to render literary texts both attractive and serious as intellectual work, this resulting in self-reflexiveness stimulated by writing and reading alike. The article emphasizes the role of Latvian literary realism in shaping the contours of nineteenth-century literature.

Keywords: Latvian literature, literary communication, literary realism, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, self-reflexiveness.

CONTEXTELE ISTORICE ȘI AUTOREFLEXIVITATEA ESTETICĂ ALE
REALISMULUI LITERAR LETON DIN SECOLUL AL XIX-LEA
(*Rezumat*)

Acest articol urmărește dezvoltarea literaturii letone din secolul al XIX-lea în contexte istorice și estetice comparative. Analiza se concentrează pe modurile în care schimbările sociale din secolul al XIX-lea au condiționat importanța literaturii și a comunicării literare în general, pe relevanța realismului literar și a inovațiilor sale tematice, precum și poetice, precum și pe rolul pe care proiectele literare realiste l-au jucat în stimularea autoreflexivității literaturii ca răspuns la provocările modernității. Principalele sarcini ale literaturii din secolul al XIX-lea pot fi definite ca necesitatea de a legitima demersurile literare, de a acorda atenție unor sfere ale experienței anterior subreprezentate, precum cea a cotidianului, de a căuta și a găsi o formă poetică adecvată și de a face ca textele literare să fie atât atractive, cât și substanțiale ca demers intelectual, ceea ce a dus la o autoreflexivitate stimulată deopotrivă prin scriere și lectură. Articolul subliniază rolul realismului literar leton în delimitarea specificității literaturii secolului al XIX-lea.

Cuvinte-cheie: literatură letonă, comunicare literară, realism literar, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, autoreflexivitate.