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DOI: 10.35539/LTNC.2025.0060.05

Roses for the Lord of Storms: Analysis of Aspazija's Poetry Dedicated to the Authoritarian Leader of Latvia

Rozes vētru kungam: Aspazijas veltījuma dzeja Latvijas autoritārajam līderim

Keywords:

Kārlis Ulmanis,
nationalism,
authoritarianism,
Neo-Baroque

Atslēgvārdi:

Kārlis Ulmanis,
nacionālisms,
autoritārisms,
neobaroks

The study was carried out within the framework of the project *Soviet Era Poster – a Testimony of Art, Society and Politics in the Art Academy of Latvia Poster Collection (Soviet Poster)* (Nr. Izp-2024/1-0389)

Summary

The main aim of this article is to analyze the poem "The Hymn to the Leader" (1936) by the Latvian poetess Aspazija, which praises the Latvian authoritarian leader Kārlis Ulmanis and was written in honor of the second Harvest Festival in Rēzekne on September 13, 1936. This text is studied in the context of other similar works by Aspazija (especially the poetry collection *The Scattered Roses*). The above-mentioned Harvest Festival is examined, at the micro-level of cultural analysis, by applying the framework of a performative turn. Each power scenario is based on political mythology. Political mythology inherits from ancient religious mythology the story of creation as a rapid process that rejects development, favoring miraculous creation *ex nihilo* and a conflict that shapes the logic of societal history.

Aspazija's works celebrating authoritarianism, especially "The Hymn to the Leader", can be attributed to the genre of festive ode in the manner of the 17th-century European Baroque literary tradition. This genre was reborn during the 20th century interwar period in the public communication of non-democratic regimes, applying the allegorical *topoi* of the absolutism period. Aspazija's texts depict the authoritarian leader as a symbolic force capable of radically changing the current political situation. Aspazija's poetic lexicon contains elements of archaic mythology, whereby the category of time is expressed as a miraculous and rapid accomplishment of the Leader's will. Ulmanis's image was also endowed with sacred traits by borrowing religious motifs from the Bible.

Kopsavilkums

Šī raksta galvenais mērķis ir analizēt latviešu dzejnieces Aspazijas dzejoli "Himna vadonim" (1936), kas slavina 20. gs. 30. gadu Latvijas autoritāro līderi Kārli Ulmani un ir tapis par godu otrajiem Pļaujas svētkiem Rēzeknē 1936. gada 13. septembrī. Šis teksts pētīts kontekstā ar citiem līdzīgiem Aspazijas darbiem (it īpaši krājumu "Kaisītās rozes"). Minētie Pļaujas svētki kultūranalīzes mikrolīmenī tiek aplūkoti, piemērojot t.s. performatīvā pagrieziena ietvaru. Katrs varas scenārijs ir balstīts politiskā mitoloģijā. Politiskā mitoloģija no senās reliģiskās mitoloģijas ir mantojusi stāstu par radīšanu kā ātru procesu, kas noraida attīstību un dod priekšroku brīnumainai radīšanai *ex nihilo* un konfliktam, kas veido sabiedrības vēstures loģiku.

Autoritārismu slavinošie Aspazijas darbi, it īpaši minētā "Himna vadonim", pēc žanra atbilst svētku odu 17. gs. Eiropas baroka literāro tradīciju manierē. Šāds odu žanrs starpkaru periodā atdzima Eiropas nedemokrātisko režīmu publiskajā komunikācijā, izmantojot absolūtisma laikmeta alegoriskos toposus. Aspazijas dzeja autoritāro vadoni attēloja kā simbolisku spēku, kas spēj radikāli mainīt esošo politisko stāvokli. Aspazijas poētiskajā leksikā izmantoti arhaiskās mitoloģijas elementi, kur laika kategorija tiek izteikta kā brīnumaini ātra Vadoņa gribas piepildīšanās. Ulmaņa tēlam sakrālus vaibstus piešķīra arī no Bībeles pārņemti reliģiski motīvi.

Introduction

Aspazija (Johanna Emīlija Lizete Rozenberga, 1865–1943) is one of the key Latvian intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century. She also represents various developmental phases of the female history of Latvian literature in the period prior to World War I and after the establishment of the independent state of Latvia in 1918. Aspazija's legacy of poetic and dramatic works, in which she has at different stages articulated the themes and poetic forms of European symbolism, illustrates the history of Latvian literature in its close interconnectedness with global literary developments across European urban political space before and after World War I. Her contribution to the development of female engagement in the political processes in Latvia, especially in the Social Democratic agenda on education and social security of women in the 1920s is another important field of research. As the historian Ineta Lipša has recently indicated in her detailed analysis of the topic, Latvian women of that time made extensive use of their constitutional rights to vote and to be elected into Saeima (the parliament) of the newly established democratic Republic of Latvia (Lipša 2023: 93–94). This democratic republic existed until the coup d'état of May 15, 1934 when the parliament was dissolved, media and cultural politics were submitted to censorship, and a cult of the new Leader was established and extensively promoted in the public space by various state institutions.

Another, much less developed area of research is female poetry (and particularly Aspazija's poetic works) during the authoritarian period of Latvian statehood. This period lasted until the first phase of Soviet occupation which started on June 17, 1940, when the government of the dictator Kārlis Ulmanis, following an ultimatum, was *de facto* disabled and Stalin's government began to establish a pro-Soviet political and economic culture in Latvia.

In order to promote the research of the above-mentioned topic, this article will analyze selected Aspazija's works that glorify Ulmanis, the authoritarian leader and self-imposed head of the state during 1934–1940. As the key text of the analysis, we have chosen a festive ode to Ulmanis written on the occasion of the second Harvest Festival that took place in the city of Rēzekne in Latgale on September 13, 1936.

This study is framed by a wider context of similar other works by Aspazija and other authors who supplied the new ideology with literary texts for public performances. There is a number of poems and statements made in interviews or elsewhere in the public space that attest to Aspazija's involvement in the glorification cult of Ulmanis.

For example, at a meeting with teachers Aspazija enthusiastically said that the task of youth is to "follow the example of the Leader, to compete and strive upward,

just as trees in a newly planted forest push their branches toward the sun"¹ (O.V. 1939: 10). In spite of her Social Democrat past, Aspazija managed to get support from the authoritarian regime. In 1939 she received the Prize of Fatherland (*Tēvzemes balva*). Established in 1937, this prize was awarded by a Council headed by Ulmanis. When asked what she would have said during the laureate ceremony if she had been given the floor, Aspazija replied that she would have thanked the Leader (Plaudis 1939: 5). She was also among those who donated money to the national guards (*aizsargi*) organization less than a month after the coup (*Aizsargu priekšnieka pateicība* 1934: 291). Later, she expressed willingness to donate her golden bracelet and golden francs from the time of Louis XIV for the construction of Victory Square (*Uzvaras laukums*) in the capital Riga. Even Ulmanis thought it was too much, and in a letter to the poet he asked her not to give away these precious things: "[T]his is not the [right] time to make such sacrifices" (Ulmanis 1936). A campaign "*Dosim labāko Raiņa un Aspazijas muzejam Kastanjolā!*" (Let's give our best to the Museum of Rainis and Aspazija in Castagnola!) was launched in order to collect memorabilia for the planned Rainis and Aspazija Museum (at that time it could not be implemented due to World War II) in Castagnola, the Swiss village where the two poets lived from 1906 to 1920 in exile after the 1905 revolution. The campaign was funded by the Press Society, and this happened despite the fact that supporting the memory of Rainis as a Social Democrat was not a priority of Ulmanis's authoritarian government (Grīnuma 2009: 61–63). Later, after World War II, the memory of Rainis and Aspazija found itself at the crossroads of the differing interests of Soviet ideologists and the Latvian diaspora in the West during the Cold War ideological battles, in which both authors were a valuable resource for symbolic communication.

Aspazija, who by 1934 had long become a well-known public intellectual figure, closely associated with her deceased husband Rainis (a Social Democrat and a glorified Latvian intellectual), during the authoritarian period of Latvian statehood published various literary works where she mainly revived and reworked her poetic forms and themes shaped by the symbolism patterns which were important to her already decades before the coup. Let us look more closely at the context of her poetry dedicated to Ulmanis. What was the political and personal frame for creating "*Himna vadonim*" (Hymn to the Leader, 1936; henceforth "The Hymn") to be analyzed below? We must point out that a large part of the facts forming the context will remain fragmented due to lack of archive materials and due to the controversial reception of Aspazija during the analyzed period.

1 The quotations here and henceforth are translated by Valdis Tēraudkalns, unless otherwise noted.

Various opinions have been expressed about the reasons why Aspazija decided to praise the authoritarian regime. One version was that of her long-lasting conflict with the leadership of the Social Democratic Party², the poet's views no longer fitting into the framework of the politically leftist ideology of a class society (Labsvīrs 1977a: 3). Jānis Labsvīrs, who in the late 1930s worked in the Ministry of Public Affairs which was directly responsible for the formation of authoritarian ideology in the public sphere, later wrote in exile that his institution did not try to influence Aspazija's attitude towards the 1934 regime – instead, it had been her own conscious decision. Meanwhile, there were other writers – for example, Kārlis Skalbe – who held a critical attitude towards the new ideology and never received any public gratitude or commissions (Labsvīrs 1977b: 3). The question remains: is this version based on reliable sources of the period? One of Aspazija's letters from that time contains a phrase: "The president himself wrote to me and is expecting from me..." (*Aspazijas vēstuļu pirmpublicējumi* 1966: 35), the rest of the sentence being unreadable. Did it refer to some action, a text, or a public statement? We have to acknowledge that these unfinished words and emotional metaphoric language still hide their secrets from the researchers today. Thus, any attempt to revisit, restore and reread the past will be partly a fiction, because a large amount of sources are lost or disfigured into myths.

Kārlis Ulmanis actively worked on establishing his personal cult, using various state and municipal institutions to create an intense performative space for the rituals of glorification. The Ministry of Education was one of the first to start working on this by organizing public open air patriotic performances in Riga as early as in July of 1934, when the show "*Atdzimšanas dziesma*" (Song of Rebirth) was staged in Esplanāde square in order to retell the history of Latvian statehood in terms of Ulmanis's theses of the "rescued" Latvian culture and state. This and other performances and festivals by various social and professional groups across the country were later managed by the Ministry of Public Affairs, established as a state propaganda institution to deal with the ideological frame of the authoritarian regime. The new political culture marginalized various political ideologies and parties, such as Social Democrats on the left side and the *dievturi* (Latvian neo-pagan movement) on the right side of political spectrum. One of the most widely used genres of glorifying literature was an ode or a festive hymn to Ulmanis, where he was usually addressed as the Leader (*Vadonis*) or Landlord/Master (*saimnieks*) and styled as the

2 This argument has been raised by Saulcerīte Viese in her study on Aspazija (Viese 2004: 416). Unfortunately, the book does not provide references to the sources used by the author. The information was probably taken from Jānis Kārklīš's own memories (Kārklīš 1967: 58) and those of his contemporaries which claim that Ulmanis made sure that Aspazija did not have to pay debts.

protector of the Latvians (who, according to the new ideological frame, had been facing political chaos and peril shortly before the coup of May 15).

The fact that Aspazija's financial situation improved after the coup and her significant debts were suspended (Viese 2004: 436) probably also played a role in her choice to praise Ulmanis. The whole topic of Aspazija's relationships with various political regimes in 1930s and early 1940s has not yet been sufficiently researched. There are some short studies like the one by Herberts Balodis (Balodis 1993: 30–37), and some (if any at all) paragraphs in biographies of and collective monographs on Aspazija. The present article is an attempt to add a source-based reading of the Latvian authoritarian culture through interpretation of poetic texts addressed to the new leader.

Theoretical frame and questions of the case study: Neo-baroque rulers of the interwar Europe? Approaching authoritarian performative practices

One of the key theoretical novelties produced by the linguistic turn in Western philosophical thought in the beginning of the 1970s, articulated by Clifford Geertz in his study "The Interpretation of Cultures", was the concept of culture understood as an "acted document, thus [...] public" (Geertz 1973:10). Culture, according to this concept, was created and circulated in an immense variety of sign. Performance is thus defined as a social drama, acted in rituals and ceremonies which aim to produce social relations of power through public demonstration of accepted cultural meanings. Performative turn, evolved out of the linguistic turn and supported by performative arts and theatre studies, offered a wide contextual frame for understanding culture as a public interaction that creates, cancels or re-establishes socially acceptable interpretations of meanings.

In this article we examine the authoritarian ideological tools of the Ulmanis regime within the cultural frame of other non-democratic European interwar ideologies – which, as we will show later, made intense use of Baroque public performative culture. We denote these ideas, concepts, texts and performative actions by the term "non-democratic Neo-Baroque politics". These tools, linked to the traditions of the monarchical miracle and the divine origin of power, included an array of cultural texts articulating the new, post-democratic concept of society through a radically different image of the political leader and the origin and nature of power. European interwar non-democratic elites revived, applied and developed the

Baroque category of the political spectacular in order to establish (through the regularity of mass performative culture) the new paradigm of an existential conflict against a democratic “enemy” won by the supernatural capacities of the new ruler, who became a new quasi-religious pantocrator (the almighty one).

The public nature of performative actions led Richard S. Wortman to coin the term *scenarios of power*. It was helpful for his analysis of Russian imperial culture when reading the political messages of the monarchy in various fields, including geo-political issues and priorities, the image of a ruler, and the vision of origins of power. According to this researcher, power is “an elite institution with its own culture, expressed in a symbolic system” (Wortman 2006: 1).

The application of the concept of performative turn to the cultural history of non-democratic European countries in the interwar period (beginning with the early 1920s and Mussolini’s rule and ending with the early 1930s in Nazi Germany and Eastern, Central and South European authoritarian regimes, including the Baltic states) highlights various aspects, important for this study. Firstly, the culture produced within the ideological constraints of non-democratic politics imposed on the heterogenic social fabric of post-democratic societies an idea of unity which was defined as a tool and a guarantee protecting from social instability and insecurity experienced during the previous political regime (which was “successfully eliminated” in the name of stability). Stability was presented in the vocabulary of a golden age as an ancient literary *topos*, rediscovered and employed by the new regimes. The previous researchers of the regime of Ulmanis have already presented a variety of case studies and archive materials to prove this theory by applying a conceptual frame of the performative turn. The concept of the end of history, a twin *topos* of a golden age in Latvian authoritarian ideology, was intensively distributed in various media available to the authoritarian ideology – such as ministries, schools, museums, arts, performative events staged in the capital of Latvia (e.g. the already mentioned show “Song of Rebirth” in July 1934), and various regional festivals. The “end of history” was defined as the result of the coup d’état, whereby the Latvian history found its revelation and symbolic “peace” in and through Ulmanis’s new political culture. The most widely used *topos* in the media of the regime was that of the conclusion of political development – with no more political diversity, which was presented as having been a source of chaos and a threat to the Latvian ethnic cultural dominance in the state. Political interests of separate groups of society were also seen as cancelled by the new government of unity. These theses and the concept of a unified society at rest were identifiable in mass festivals, among which the second Harvest Festival in Latgale is an example which illustrates the authoritarian patterns of the new regime particularly well.

Thus, at the micro level of cultural analysis within the methodology of performative turn, this article will deal with the case of the above-mentioned festival which took place in the city of Rēzekne (the regional centre of Latgale) on September 13, 1936. In this study we have defined authoritarianism as a set of symbolically articulated concepts of the Latvian society. The contemporaneity of the Latvian society was to be shaped by the grand narrative of the regime – describing the supposed rescue of Latvia through the coup d'état on May 15, 1934. The future of Latvia, according to this narrative, had been endangered by a universal catastrophe allegedly caused by the "weak" and inefficient political pluralism of the parliamentary culture before the coup. Each scenario of power, as Wortman points out, is based on political mythology (Wortman 2006: 1). The Latvian version of the non-democratic mythology of the "close shave" and "happy escape" will be the ideological frame for analyzing the poetic texts written by Aspazija for the new regime.

Secondly, myth as such, according to Ernst Cassirer, is shaped by dramatic features – not in the sense of a peculiar agitation of emotions, but as a performed action created by a clash between natural forces or actors (Kasīrers 1997: 82). Political mythology had inherited from the ancient religious mythology the story of creationism: a quick and non-logical process which rejects development and prefers a marvelous creation *ex nihilo*, and a conflict shaping the logics of the history of the society which accepts the mythological dynamics of societal development. The myth of chaos versus harmony must be performed in order to be told and accepted. The performativity is the very essence of the myth as a collective story of belonging to and holding together a group. Thus the mythological language of the non-democratic narrative was destined to be staged at public events, such as the Rēzekne festival and many others.

Thirdly, the clash of ideas, parties, power groups or nature's forces in the mythological logics of a final combat is another important feature we discovered when analyzing the Ulmanis regime in a wider European context of that time. The ideological clash, as the coup was defined, implies an existential conflict, a mortal combat which can only have two outcomes – a victory or a downfall. No situation or condition in between is possible or acceptable according to the narrative rules of the non-democratic heroism which produced a new hero – a leader. These dynamics of categorical choice are linked to the physical dimension of the society existing as a body collective, as an allegorical supra-human being which includes each and every member of the community. All become one, submitted to the victory story of the new leader.

The history of Latvia until May 15, 1934, as already said, was defined by the new regime as a mythopoetical history of a basic conflict between allegorically

shaped figures of the parliamentary culture and its antipode, the rule of Ulmanis. Both, according to the logic of political aesthetics of the Baroque *chiaroscuro*, were depicted in the already mentioned show “Song of Rebirth” (performed on a stage in the centre of Riga) in visual terms of light versus darkness, in sonic terms of harmony versus cacophony (the latter being created by the political propaganda of the numerous parties), and in spatial terms as the antithesis of the German medieval city of Riga versus Latvian rural harmony or the industrial development associated with Latvians in the metropolis (Hanovs 2010: 116–118).

Intense propaganda activities of the new regime tried to establish the legitimacy of the May 15 transformations. The regime relied on a combination of various media, plots and forms of publicly distributed narration. Ulmanis’s ideological institutions activated a variety of tools which were shaped and enacted in terms close to the aesthetics of politics in the Baroque period of European culture, as already mentioned before. In the 17th century (in Eastern Europe until the mid-18th century), Baroque was a pan-European paradigm of artistic, musical, public and political representation of absolutism power. Later, the revival of interest in Baroque – from Heinrich Wölflin and Erwin Panofsky to Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze – produced many new readings of the age that was traditionally associated with the decline of the Late Renaissance and had long been deprived of a value *eo ipso* in the history of European arts. Other authors, such as Peter Burke (Burke 1992), Doris Kolesch (Kolesch 2006), Anna Korndorf (Korndorf 2011) and Kirill Ospovat (Ospovat, 2016 & 2024), as well as the authors of this article (Hanovs 2013 and 2022; Hanovs, Tēraudkalns 2022), have applied the notion of social control to the various genres of political Baroque, thus adding the category of political discourse to the traditional categories of artistic language and intense allegorical narration. The occasionally pejorative perception of Baroque just as a set of vulgar escapades of the aristocratic Southern Europe, papal Rome, or Russian empress Elizabeth with her masked balls in the Winter palace shows a lack of interest in the more serious aspects of Baroque – e.g. its language of control and submission of various groups of European societies after the global military conflict over confessional dominance in post-Reformation Europe.

The interwar period of European political culture since the early 1920s is defined here as another period of political control which used propaganda tools borrowed from the gallery of Baroque. Public massive festivities with elaborate effects produced by electricity-driven machinery, exuberant Art Deco aesthetics with the dominance of glitter and gold, collective appreciation of Oriental ornaments in mass media, cultivation of media stars from American cinema and European cabaret – all these and many other urban visual and mechanical means of political spectacle affected the creation of new urban spaces where Neo-baroque aesthetics of non-democratic

cultures could exhibit the efficiency of their ideology. This long list would be insufficient and would lack a teleological element if we ignored the very essence of the opulence of these cultures with their intense schedule of massive outdoor events. The massive acceptance of the marvelous in the politics of the post-democracy age was the major societal, communicative and aesthetic shift all across Europe – with few exceptions such as France and Great Britain. A political miracle was made possible in the atmosphere of radical political metamorphosis in many continental European post-imperial societies with a very short and fragile period of democracy. The rapid decline and disappearance of the spectacular monarchical culture across Europe after the end of World War I in the economic and political turmoil of republicanism was the setting that welcomed the return of the political wonder and the mythological logics of rapid emotions and rapid actions. The long, slow, consensus- and talks-based culture of democratic compromise was attacked by non-democratic parties and regimes all over Europe. Performative elements of the “return of the golden age” were staged in various cities of the former democratic regimes – the new social drama, to use the term coined decades ago by Victor Turner, was aimed at cancelling the “boring” and uncertain democracy. Instead, the dynamic and highly emotional event- and miracle-oriented drama was to be staged with its main *dramatis personae* – the authoritarian and totalitarian leaders and parties.

Non-democratic Neo-Baroque mass politics of the interwar period was also developed and enacted in the artistic sphere, where various genres of mimetic arts were engaged to articulate the new ideological dominance in both urban and rural spaces. The new narrative was supposed to be established and circulated by implementing the semiotics of wonder combined with artistic density and with the presence of the Leader in everyday politicized space, where alternatives (democracy, communism, Social-Democratic symbolism of proletarian engagement) were banned. The case of Nazi Germany, where German Romanticism in arts and literature was rediscovered by the totalitarian cultural policy as soon as in early February of 1933, shows that arts were redefined as eternal and static, thus subjugated to the leader of the new oppressive regime. German Chancellor Adolf Hitler was regarded as the ultimate judge of artistic eternity, rather than as one of many viewers of a fluid artistic modernity in its pluralism of forms and endless interpretations (Groys 2013: 137). An important element of the new public culture of non-democratic regimes was poetry which addressed the radical political changes in a glorifying manner, using the poetic and dramatic tradition of the European Baroque court in order to shape a divine image of the ruler. Festive odes or hymns addressed to a party or a leader in our opinion can be regarded as 20th-century analogues of the court ode for a Baroque sovereign. In the Latvian case this genre also had its feminine

voice – Aspazija, the renowned poet and playwright who had represented the leftist discourse on feminism in the early years of the Latvian Republic. As already mentioned above, she articulated her persistent and emotional support for the coup of May 15 and its leader in a series of poems, one of which we will interpret further in this article, framed by similar works in this genre.

As regards the already mentioned frame of interpretation – the concept of the Baroque ruler as a political and mythological actor – we decided to turn to the works of Walter Benjamin. His most well-known research is the study of German tragic drama (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, first published in Berlin 1928), but he has also outlined the major functions and imagery of a Baroque ruler – such as internal conflict and tragic elements. According to Benjamin, a Baroque ruler is both a symbol and an author of history, and he enacts his rule over history in his public actions. We believe that this conception is also applicable to the interwar aesthetics of politics.

The above-mentioned image might seem to contradict the idea of the democratic critique of the power seizures that cancelled democratic plurality in the interwar political landscape of Europe. However, the notion of controversy is exactly what interests us in the ambiguity of a ruler's image in a Baroque play and in the performative culture of authoritarian Latvia. The concept of an exceptional state of affairs becomes a political legitimization of Baroque tyranny:

[T]he Baroque concept develops on the basis of a discussion of the state of exception, and makes it the most important function of the prince to avert this state. Whoever rules is from the beginning destined to be possessor of dictatorial powers if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should bring about a state of exception. (Benjamin 2019: 49)

Perception of universal power as a heavy duty is identifiable both in the poetic plots in Aspazija's volume *Kaisītās rozes* (The Scattered Roses, 1936) and in her poem written for the festival in Rēzekne. As we will see further, the image of *Vadonis* (Leader) had been transformed into an all-encompassing natural power whose energy and immensity possesses a potency to change, to govern and to secure the natural equilibrium. The natural and the societal were combined in the Baroque aesthetics of power – the solar concept of the ruler, reflected upon by Benjamin, was present in the Baroque tragedy as a sign of singularity, close to tragic solitude (Benjamin 2019: 52). The ambiguity of the solar imagery – which combines fostering of life and its destruction as a symbolic punishment – was one of the basic *topoi* of European absolutism. The French king Louis XIV, who revitalized the solar symbolism of Valois imagery after the civil war of Fronde for the Bourbon dynasty, was described in the following way by his latent critic duke de Saint-Simon in his account of the sickness and death of the playwright Jean Racine in 1699. The dramatist, being a court historian, had "gained [...] some degree of intimacy with the King" (Saint-Simon

1959: 40). As the result of being too close to the sun (due to Racine's absent-mindedness and some critical remarks about the family of the King's favorite and unofficial wife de Maintenon), the author of classicism tragedies fell in disgrace, was forbidden to be in the presence of the sovereign, fell ill and died soon afterwards. The duke, even without having read the study by Benjamin, provided an indirect proof of the tragedy of solar sovereignty and of its ability to sustain and to destroy as the very essence of royal imagery: "After that neither the King nor Mme de Maintenon spoke to Racine or took any notice of him. He was so distressed that he fell into a decline and died two years later." (Saint-Simon 1959: 41)

Another feature of a Baroque ruler reflected upon in the study of Benjamin was indecisiveness in exceptional conditions – he acts, but after a long period of reflexion on moral and emotional issues. Such are the figures of the Roman emperor Titus or Persian prince Artaxerxes, for example, in libretti by Pietro Metastasio – both characters undergo deep changes in the process of understanding their role as rulers, and then act to save their kingdoms from peril. No such long reflexions or pauses were present in the deeds of the 20th century non-democratic European leaders. On the contrary, their excessive decision-making capacities aimed to prove the supernatural powers of a mortal political – see e.g. the story of Mussolini who, with his media-broadcasted vitality and risky sports activities, acquired features of a superhero and was even regarded as a divinity to pray to for rain after a long drought (Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi 2007: 91). In the Latvian version of supernatural features of the leader, Ulmanis (according to Aspazija) was granted extremely strong political will and needed no pauses. He had adopted some ideas and performative practices of the Italian fascism,³ so it is natural that he assigned such a significant role to the transformation and revival of ancient myths and the creation of new ones. As Emilio Gentile, a researcher of political ideology, describes Italian fascism: "[The] ways of visualizing and dramatizing myths, symbols, and rituals were necessary to make the mythology of the "Fascist religion" accessible to the masses and to convert them to the new faith" (Gentile 1996: 84).

The link between Baroque representation of an absolutist ruler and Neo-Baroque culture of interwar mass festivals can be shown within the frame of performative turn: both ideological concepts created social drama of an endangered political universe rescued by a royal or new leader. Both periods made use of urban space as a stage for open-air mass events in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of the head

3 It should be noted that there were differences between Italian fascism and authoritarianism in Latvia. In Mussolini's case it was the state that was elevated to the level of sacredness, in Latvia – the nation (Pourchier-Plasseraud 2015: 443).

of the state. Both cultural formations employed a multi-levelled combination of ancient and Christian mythology, creating a sacred memory space of the political crisis and the events of salvation. From the Medici's court in Florence with their *intermedii* and early Orpheus story to the Latvian coup of May 15, 1934, the history of a ruling family or of a new leader was turned into hagiography with the help of multimedia tools. This transformation of history from the combination of political processes into a sacred history of an event (founding; restoration of political order) also transformed the political community of a former democratic society. In the rhetorics of non-democratic regimes, society as a spectrum of politically diverse groups of interest must turn into a unified community, a parish consolidated under a quasi-religious leadership. Private, particular interests that cause tension and conflicts had to be avoided and deleted from the public imagery of the post-democratic society, where "We" had become an abstract but widely used substitution for societal heterogeneity. Aspazija's poetry, as we will see below, reflected these elements of the transfigured Latvian society by means of religious symbolism, by biblical but also pantheistic vocabulary of nature driven by the will of a superhero Ulmanis.

Though the temporal distance of three centuries between the Baroque culture of power and the 20th century dictatorships may cause skepticism regarding the issues of aesthetic inheritance, the culture of deification of a modern ruler, his metaphysical transition from a politician (often with career in democratic administrative institutions or parliaments) into a natural force or a deity can build a bridge between two cultural formations – Baroque and modernity. Culture of public allegoric festivities with a deity or a ruler at their centre, inherited from the Baroque artistic practices of the *ancien regime*, never actually disappeared for long – the French nation, which succeeded the feudal performativity of *les rois thaumaturges* (the miracle-working kings), established new forms of festive performances which presented the nation and constitutional culture as sacred. The pan-European nationalism culture in its countless variations across the continent in the 19th century had created new altars and new lay priests. Thus there was no long-lasting interruption in the semiotic sacrality of a leader or a political victim-hero and hero triumphant in European political culture. In the state of the interwar political and economic turbulences, many European societies (including the Baltics) supported the fall of democratic pluralism and reestablished old hierarchies in new images of leaders created according to the semiotic practices of the miraculous.

As we proceed to the interpretation of Aspazija's texts, we pose the following questions: what semiotic elements of the Baroque ruler (interaction with natural elements, scenarios of action, attributes, situations or preconditions, conflicts) from the array of artistic tools of the 17th century political culture of absolutism were

applied by Aspazija when composing the festive ode for the Latvian dictator Ulmanis? How did the poet intend to explain the legitimacy of the new leader in her poetics? These issues will be discussed in the next chapter of this study, where we look at the Latvian version of the transfiguration of a former politician and prime minister into the driving force of an authoritarian culture or rather universe (taking into account the cosmogonic tune of the above-mentioned poem).

It's all about him... Imagery of Kārlis Ulmanis in Aspazija's poem "Hymn to the Leader"

Following the tradition of Baroque ceremonial public events which were explained to the participants and posterity in commemorative brochures, the second Harvest Festival in Rēzekne, celebrated on September 13, 1936, was also described in great detail to its audience (and to those who did not attend in person) in a small brochure. It consisted of the schedule of the festive event and was supplemented by various dramatic and poetic texts which were to be presented during the ceremony.

The festival began early in the morning with large bonfires which were supposed to introduce the festive mood, as the early trains brought in the first participants. At 12:30, Ulmanis and representatives of the government were expected to arrive in Rēzekne. Then the glorification part was to begin, introduced with the song with the first line "*Mēs suminām Tevi, tautas Vienotāj!*" (We Hail You, Unificator of the Nation). Its lyrics were written by the Latvian poet Vilis Plūdonis. The song, performed by a mixed choir and orchestra, was followed by a festive declamation whereby the Leader was greeted at the gates of honor by the welcoming committee. These performances were followed by a song "*Himna Vadonim*" (Hymn to the Leader) composed by Jāzeps Mediņš with the lyrics by Aspazija. The address of Ulmanis to the participants was planned for 13:40. In his speech, he referred to the myth of the ancient Latvian king Visvaldis, and also quoted unnamed residents of Latgale who had allegedly stated that they do not need old castles and ruins, "because Rēzekne is full of new castles" (*Šis gads ir lielu un dižu sasniegumu gads* 1936: 2). Thus, a break in history was symbolically created, rejecting the Baltic German cultural heritage and its visual traces in the Latvian landscape. The entire event was planned as a performance, during which various groups of residents declared their loyalty to the Leader. For example, a farmer representative recited an oath, after which he presented Ulmanis with a gift – a decorated oak chair (*Lielie plaujas svētki Rēzeknē* 1936: 8).

The text by Aspazija was published in the festive brochure together with two poems by Plūdonis: "*Dziesma tautas Vienotājam*" (The Song for the Unificator of the Nation) and "*Tev mūžam dzīvot, Latvija*" (You Must Live Forever, Latvia), and a piece

by Alberts Sprūdžs – “*Laiks gadu strauvēn plūst*” (Time Flows in Yearly Streams). Aspazija’s text is a short twelve-line poem, divided in four three-line verses. Our prosaic translation of the text is as follows:

There is no peril on the way of heroism,
Because the blue rays of soul overcome flames
And wings carry you beyond the starry firmament.
Each hero is a part of the eternal power
From which the world’s edifice is built,
And he carries centuries on his shoulders.
You, born in flesh, eternally being reborn,
You, reposing and eternally flying,
You, a rebel (lit.: non-peaceful) who brings peace to the others,
Go forward, teach [us] how to follow (lit.: chase) you,
Go through storms, you need not fear the storms
Because you know you are a lord over the storms.

(2. Latvju zemnieku Pļaujas svētki Rēzeknē 1936: 11)⁴

The construction model of this poem is antithetic. It is built according to the structure of Baroque poetics of conflict and binary opposition, which is aimed at a gradual rise of emotions. The binary structure implies the co-existence of oppositions, thus negative phenomena are also shown – such as peril, pressure, or storms. These phenomena never endanger or question the status of the hero – the Leader. Danger does not stop the hero, and his immense physical and emotional strength enables him to articulate his supernatural strength in action. We have identified three sources of glorification content in the poetry: Old and New Testament, pantheistic symbolism, and Baroque allegorical terms related to the imagery of *Naturschauspiel* (nature show). During the 17–18th century, a ruler’s political potency was often depicted in terms of interaction between natural forces and their presence in human world, such as the conflict of darkness and light in absolutism iconography (Levit 2011: 17).

One of the main elements in the heroic profile of Ulmanis is indicated by his intense energy: the hero’s body and its physical strength consist solely of objects and elements that are in motion. Verbs denoting action are dominant in the piece: *born* and *reborn*; *build* and *carry*; *go forward* and *teach* (i.e. bring new knowledge), *repose* and *bring peace*. Various nouns are associated with further actions of the leader. For instance, shoulders evoke the mythological image of Atlas who carried the earth on his shoulders and secured the stability of the world lest it falls. Besides

4 The original Latvian text: “Uz varonības ceļa nava briesmu, / Jo zilie dvēš'les stari pārvar liesmu / Un spārni augstāk nes par zvaigznāju. / Ik varon's daļa ir no mūža spēka, / No kuŗa radīta top pasaul's ēka, / Un gadu simteņus tas plecās nes. / Tu miesā dzimis, mūžam atdzimstošais, / Tu dusošais un mūžam lidojošais, / Tu nemiernieks, mums citiem mieru nes. / Ej tālāk, māci mūs tev pakāļ dzīties, / Ej vētrām cauri, nav tev vētru bīties, / Jo zini, pats par vētrām kungs tu esi.” (2. Latvju zemnieku Pļaujas svētki Rēzeknē 1936:11)

that, an Apollonic element of the new leader is stressed by the knowledge that he would transmit to the people. Unlike Prometheus, he would accomplish this without suffering, and provide the people with knowledge of how to pursue the deified leader (the employed verb denotes a continuous, non-completed process). This implies that at the current situation the poetic we, i.e. the ethnic Latvians, are not yet able to reach the leader's superiority as they lack the knowledge and are in a state of a non-activated, not fully alive community.

The task of activating the people, ascribed to the head of the state, must be ensured with a special material his the body is made of – Aspazija describes various body parts of Ulmanis as made of the eternal power. We would suggest to read these descriptions as a variation of Ovid's "*Metamorphoses*". In his mythopoetical history of the world, the exiled Roman author anticipated the return of the golden age which, according to him, was made possible by the Roman senator and dictator Caesar and by his adopted son Augustus. In the first chapter of the poem, when explaining the creation of the material world, Ovid depicts the peril and decline of the civilization and mores when Astrea, the virgin symbolizing the eternal peace and prosperity, leaves the blood-soaked earth of conflicts and wars. Visual dominance, the allegoric tool employed by Ovid, was also used by Aspazija in the 1930s to depict a plot of creationism and the patterns of the birth and appearance of the new savior: thus Ulmanis has got a special blue soul light, and its rays can fight flames. If we presume that the flames represent perilous fire (fire as natural or political catastrophe and a widespread *topos* of turbulence in poetry, propaganda posters and even operatic libretti), then the ancient mythological significance of fire as a divine element might be ascribed to the rays which come from within the soul of the new leader and destroy the fire which is a chaotic element.

In the Old Testament and in Christian mythology and iconography, an inner light seen by witnesses is the image of an internal sacred nature or miraculous experience, the special divine stigma that elevates the bearer of this light above others. Moses and Christ in their transfiguration were depicted as framed by sacred light coming from within their bodies, connecting them to the divine and testifying to their own sacred status. Another interpretation could be the neoplatonic reading of the blue rays as a concept of the return of all mortal beings to the God, as they are agitated through the light of divine love. In Marsilio Ficino's interpretation of Plato's conception of love, light is the visual element of hierarchic harmony of the world, created by a God who does not move. In comparison to the Renaissance idea of static divinity, the divine subject of Aspazija is extremely active – even peace is not a passive and given condition, but must be delivered by the supernatural hero to the community which then returns to the hero. Peace being delivered also means that there has been a

turbulence previously, which as a negative phenomenon may be linked to the idea of flames in their negative connotation – as destruction and lack of peace. In this combination, the internal rays of the new human divinity overcome the external, political flames of disorder, and bring peace to the community of Latvians.

As we know from the descriptions of various festive performances in the 1930s (including the "Song of Rebirth" in 1934 in Riga and the Rēzekne festival in 1936), one of the most often employed metaphors of the democratic republic was an image of a political chaos, conflicts and turbulences. After May 15, 1934, peace had been delivered and the community, too, was delivered from the danger of turmoil. The narrative of the peace and prosperity achieved by Ulmanis was also present in other texts of the 1936 brochure. A patriotic play "*Svētā zeme*" (Sacred Land), written by Alberts Sprūdžs and performed on September 13, 1936, consisted of various scenes of Latgale history, starting with the old times when Latgalians suffered from hard labour. Antons, the protagonist of the play, goes to study in St. Petersburg and returns with visions of national revival for his region and his people. This idea takes political shape during the Liberation war in the early 1920s when the Rēzekne Congress decides that the Latgale region has to become a part of the independent Latvia. After a scene that shows the war liberating the Latvian territory, the period of the democratic republic is not represented. The authors of the play skip the political diversity in favor of the "end of history" – when the unified people under the auspice of the leader Ulmanis complete the story of their political development. Antons, now a Latgalian deputy, sings a song of praise to the leader and declares that life has improved after the "Owner of the Land" (*Zemes Saimnieks*) took the power in his hands. As the result, the country has become more beautiful and also more Latvian (Sprūdžs 1936: 28), thus supporting the idea of Latvianizing the Latgalian culture by the new regime after the coup. The play ends with a ballet and an oath to Ulmanis: the unified Latvian people promise to guard and preserve Latvia forever (Sprūdžs 1936: 29).

Besides the combination of Ancient Greek and Christian mythologies, typical of the Baroque iconography of European rulers, there is another layer which is difficult to define or name. We shall use the term *Naturschauspiel* coined by Benjamin, invoking the Baroque vocabulary of the theatricality of nature in the absolutism narrative of an all-encompassing adoration of the ruler. We can hear this narrative in the most popular image of a ruler – the one where he is compared to Orpheus, the poet and favourite of Gods, who transgressed the borders of physical world. In the early Baroque opera "*La morte d'Orfeo*" (The Death of Orpheus) by Italian composer Stefano Landi, the nature itself in all its physical forms (rivers, mountains, forests etc.) is moved by Orfeo's divine gift of music and succumbs to it. Another dimension

of the interaction between natural forces and humans is, according to late philosophy historian Valery Podoroga, the human anxiety which signifies the guilt and sins in front of God (Podoroga 2022: 47). Thus, natural catastrophes were experienced as divine punishment. (However, in the twelve lines of Aspazija's poem one cannot observe any indication of Ulmanis as a figure of punishment, rather than a leader of transformation of the society.)

The elements of *Naturschauspiel* bring Ulmanis outside the circle of human beings or divinities incarnated as human beings. Instead, he is placed within the realm of natural forces, such as air, wind, and their extreme form i.e. storms, which have to be overcome by the eternal movement of the "lord of storms". These air elements are expressed by verbs such as *lidot* (to fly) and the noun *nemiernieks* (rebel; *lit.*: the non-peaceful one). The eternity of the new leader, his exception from the community of mortals was, according to Aspazija's text, granted to Ulmanis by his ability to be constantly reborn. This ability is underlined by the statement that he, even though born in flesh (i.e. as a mortal), has been transformed and has overcome the bodily, physical temporality of existence. The final line, urging the leader not to fear the storms, is his apotheosis. He is rewarded with the title of a lord who reigns over storms, as he subjugates political storms and flames to his will. The end of the poem is structured in terms of the end of history – the renewal of nature in a transfigured, leader of the "natural forces" is the end of the temporal category, as he is here to stay for eternity, capable to be reborn and to stop history which is a source of trouble and uncertainty.

In order to view "The Hymn" in the poetic context of other Aspazija's texts dedicated to Ulmanis, we suggest to look at her poetry collection *Kaisītās rozes* (The Scattered Roses). Different opinions have been expressed about the texts in this collection. The linguist Rasma Sināte has pointed out that at least some of the texts have been composed before Ulmanis's rule and already published in Social Democratic collections, and thus were not referring to the authoritarian period (Sināte 1968: 92–93). We, however, find that the following opinion of Bruno Kalniņš, the leader of Social Democrats, is more convincing: "[I]t is quite characteristic that Aspazija included epigrams from this democratic era in *The Scattered Roses* [...] which, according to their content, could also be attributed to the Ulmanis dictatorship" (Kalniņš 1968: 94). It is interesting that Kalniņš himself had thought earlier that the texts in *The Scattered Roses* contained a hidden critique of the regime, but later renounced that view (Kalniņš 1968: 93–94). We need to keep in mind that he and other diaspora Latvian authors did not have access to many sources. In Soviet Latvia it was the opposite – authors sometimes had access to various classified sources, but were not free to publish their findings and to make use of Western theoretical novelties.

The title *The Scattered Roses* may be interpreted within the European tradition of glorification and apotheosis in various mythological, poetical and political performative practices. Roses, scattered from above over someone or under their feet, were used in the glorification ceremonies of various European sovereigns. In the medieval literature, rose was also a symbol of mystical religious experience. The triumphal element of the rose symbolism was used during the Ulmanis regime when welcoming the new leader on his visits to various regions of Latvia. The newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas* (The Most Recent News) regularly published photos of these visits, where girls were scattering flowers in front of the leader. For example, a report titled "Expecting the Leader" (*Vadoņa jausma*) by writer and journalist Ādolfs Erss depicts a visit of Ulmanis to the town of Pļaviņas in June 1936. A photo shows two teenage girls, dressed in white, walking before Ulmanis and throwing around petals of white flowers from baskets that they are holding (Erss 1937: 17). The motto of *The Scattered Roses* volume clearly invokes the tradition of rose as a sign of triumph and a ceremonial gift: "A small rose for this one, a small rose for that one, a whole armful [of roses] for the Leader"⁵ (Aspazija 1936: no page indicated). The title of the first subchapter of this poetry collection is "*Ģēnija aicinājums*" (The Calling of the Genius) which, as well as its dedication "*Tautas vadonim Dr. K. Ulmanim*" (To the leader of the people, Dr. K. Ulmanis), augments the pathos. The first poem in the collection holds a title "*Vadonim Dr. K. Ulmanim*" (almost identical to the subchapter title), and its content is almost identical to that of "The Hymn", with a new three-line verse added (placed before the last verse). In the third line of the first verse, a rider (*jājējs*) is now mentioned instead of the stars (*zvaigznājs*). The following text of the newly added verse shows a less festive and more doubtful mood:

Maybe the great dream of your life will not be fulfilled,
But nonetheless souls warm themselves by it,
As the sea gets warm after the sunset (Aspazija 1936: 7)⁶

This implies that the Latvians will remember the Leader even after he is no longer physically present and after darkness comes (following the sunset), which can also be interpreted as an allegory of death. The Leader like the sun still provides warmth – even when his aim, the prosperity of the people, is not achieved despite all the physical and intellectual capacities of the superhero. Various heroes of European mythological landscapes, such as King Arthur in England or Lāčplēsis in the Latvian

5 The original text in Latvian: "*Šim rozīte, tam rozīte, Vadonim pilnu klēpi*" (Aspazija 1936: no page indicated).

6 The original text in Latvian: "*Varbūt tev mūžā lielais sapnis nepiepildās, / Bet tomēr dvēseles pie viņa sildās, / Kā jūra silta top pēc saules rieta*" (Aspazija 1936: 7).

national movement, did not win or achieve their goal. They temporarily passed away or moved to a faraway place from where they can still exert their influence and also promise to return or to keep fighting against the enemies of their people. Ulmanis's physical life ended in a Soviet camp, and his body was never found and identified. In a way, this fact has added a vital element to his mythological biography, to this day symbolically providing the immortality described repeatedly by Aspazija. In her poetic imagination the image of the Leader has religious features; just like in Christianity, it is associated with resurrection. See, for instance, the poem "*Liieldienu zvanī*" (Easter Bells) with its lines: "We are the new casting of the ancient bells, / We are the Easter message in the tomb vault" (Aspazija 1936: 12)⁷. An exalted portrayal of the Leader as the embodiment of goodness was also expressed in her personal correspondence: "Only the kind heart of our dear president keeps me going. Oh, how good he is!" (Aspazija 1938).

Conclusions. The ruler and his solitude – a non-democratic scenario of the poetics of power

This article presents the analysis of selected poetic works by Aspazija, in which she addresses Kārlis Ulmanis – the new, self-imposed leader of the authoritarian regime in Latvia after the coup of May 15, 1934. The lyrical genre of these works and especially of the poem "The Hymn to the Leader" (1936) allows to define them as festive odes written in the tradition of the 17th century European Baroque literature. Across Europe, various non-democratic regimes in the 20th century used and updated the genre of the court ode in public communication, applying the allegorical *topoi* of the absolutism period to the new authoritarian leaders. Glorification as a multimedial ideological process often took the shape of open-air festivals in both of these ideological paradigms and historical epochs – the Baroque and the 20th century interwar period. Their common element was the performative action used to stage the miraculous deeds of a new leader whose actions had revised the history of his society by turning it into a new, socially and politically unified and homogeneous group, loyal to the leader and free from diversity of interests. Conflicts were allegedly overcome and were never to return, thanks to the supernatural abilities and knowledge of the new leader. These features provided him with a special place within the cosmogony of the new regime – at the very top of the political universe, unreachable and currently unreachable by the

7 The original Latvian text: "*Mēs seno zvanu jaunais pārlējums, / Mēs kapu velvē Liieldienvēstījums*" (Aspazija 1936: 12).

community of observers, into which the post-democratic society of actors was to be transfigured. This kind of hierarchy produced the key element of the sacred status of Ulmanis – his supernatural solitude and an emotional Baroque-shaped weight on his shoulders as a price paid for being the demiurge of the new political reality.

While the hymn was the dominant literary genre in which Aspazija celebrated Ulmanis and his regime, she also expressed similar ideas in other instances of public communication, presenting the new leader as a symbolic power or a natural force able to radically change the situation. Aspazija's poetic vocabulary is that of symbolism combined with elements of archaic mythology – for instance, the themes of creationism whereby the category of time is at the same time compressed into the frame of a miraculous rapidity of will and expanded into an endless realm of repetitive eternity of the rebirth of the leader. Christian motives, together with Old Testament plots and imagery, added even more sacred features to the image of Ulmanis.

At the same time, Aspazija's participation in the glorification campaign of Ulmanis is a part of a sad story about trying to survive under the rule of various political regimes that rapidly succeed each other and also bring violence and persecution to artists. It sends a message about those intellectuals (both today and in the past) who take over the voices of others and, by indulging in self-censorship, silence their own critical voices. During the short period of the first Soviet occupation, Aspazija also tried to be useful to the new regime. The regime, however, used her for its own purposes. Writer and Soviet activist Jūlijs Lācis wrote to Žanis Spure (after the Soviet occupation in 1940 he was the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia, previously having been an employee of the USSR secret services) about a poem sent to him by Aspazija: "It seems to me that its printing depends on the extent to which it would provide an opportunity to split the bourgeois circles" (Eversone 2023: 49). The compilers of Aspazija's poetry collections later, during the second period of Soviet occupation, used an unpublished manuscript where she congratulated the Red Army on its arrival in Latvia as an excuse to publish her works at all (Labrence 1965: 6). There is also unpublished poem that she dedicated "to the creative genius, the bearer of the sun, the great comrade Stalin" (Aspazija 1940: 1).

However, the zenith of Aspazija's fame was already behind – symbolically, the attitude of the new authorities was shown in September 1940 by changing the name of Aspazija Street in the town of Saldus to Leons Paegle Street (*Jauni nosaukumi* 1940: 7). An underground communist writer was much more acceptable to the Soviet system than a "bourgeois" writer. Jānis Niedre, one of the founders of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union, described her as "a typical bourgeois romantic whose revolutionarism is expressed in romantic fantasy" (Niedre 1941: 693).

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