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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Nietzsche in *fin-de-siècle* Latvian Literary Culture

Johans Volfgangs fon Gēte un Frīdrihs Nīče latviešu literārajā kultūrā 19. un 20. gadsimta mijā

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Summary

In *fin-de-siècle* Latvian literature we observe an increasingly active dialogue with the most significant phenomena in European writing, testifying to a need and desire for creating an elite culture. Goethe and Nietzsche were among the most respected German authors, often mentioned in Latvian culture of the period. Sometimes they have been considered as opposites, directly or indirectly using the Apollonian and Dionysian concepts as developed in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). However, the mentioned juxtaposition is not so pronounced in the modern-day assessment of both authors. The creative quests of Goethe's oeuvre, including his late works, reveal an innovative approach to writing, while Nietzsche's radical ideas were shaped by his productive dialogue with classical culture. The opinions of the turn-of-the-century Latvian authors display a great (though not yet sufficiently apprehended) diversity in their evaluation of the both German writers. For example, Rainis's notes from the 1880s and 1890s onwards contain references not only to Goethe's but also to Nietzsche's poetics and ideas. This article delves into the reception of these two German authors in *fin-de-siècle* Latvian cultural milieu, considering the literary texts and essays as well as personal correspondence of Latvian writers (among them Rainis, Aspazija, Jānis Poruks, and Rūdolfs Blaumanis).

Kopsavilkums

19. un 20. gadsimta mijas latviešu literatūrā vērojams arvien aktīvāks dialogs ar nozīmīgākajām parādībām Eiropas rakstniecībā, apliecinot nepieciešamību un vēlmi veidot elitāru kultūru. Gēte un Nīče ir vācu autori, kuri tālaika latviešu kultūrvidē ir ievēroti un bieži pieminēti. Dažkārt viņi uzlūkoti kā pretstati, tieši vai netieši izmantojot Nīčes darbā "Trāģēdijas dzimšana no mūzikas gara" (1872) iztīrātās apolloniskā un dionīsiskā konceptus. Šī tēma ir izpētes vērtā, jo minētie pretstati abu autoru mūsdienu izvērtējumā nav tik izteikti. Radošie meklējumi Gētes daiļradē, tostarp viņa vēlīnajos darbos atklāj laikmetīgu pieeju rakstniecībai, savukārt Nīčes radikālās idejas veidojās produktīvā dialogā ar klasisko kultūru. Arī gadsimtu mijas latviešu autoru viedokļi par šiem vācu autoriem rāda lielu daudzveidību, kas līdz šim vēl nav tikusi pietiekami apzināta. Piemēram, Raiņa piezīmēs kopš 19. gadsimta 80. gadiem rodamas liecības ne tikai par Gētes, bet arī par Nīčes darbu un ideju pazīšanu. Raksta mērķis ir iedziļināties abu vācu autoru darbu recepcijā un viņu nozīmē gadsimtu mijas latviešu literārajā kultūrā, balstoties atziņās, kas izteiktas Raiņa, Aspazijas, Jāņa Poruka, Rūdolfa Blaumaņa un citu rakstnieku darbos, apcerēs un arī privātajā sarakstē.

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche commences his first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*) in 1872, with this retrospective as well as programmatic statement: "We will have achieved much for the discipline of aesthetics when we have arrived not only at the logical insight but also at the immediate certainty of the view that the continuing development of art is tied to the duality of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*" (Nietzsche 2006b: 42).

As pointed out by Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large, the editors of the English language selection of Nietzsche's works, "[i]n *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche presents the Dionysian and the Apollonian as "tendencies," "drives," but also as artistic "energies" and "impulses" that burst forth from nature itself" (Ansell Pearson and Large 2006: 36). Notably, "[w]hile Apollo is associated with visible form, comprehensive knowledge and moderation, Dionysus is linked with formless flux, mystical intuition, and excess" (Ansell Pearson and Large 2006: 34). In this article, I argue that the above concepts, elaborated in their relevance to the classical Greek tragedy but containing contemporary references, in particular regarding the innovations set forth by Richard Wagner's ideas of music and drama, have not only turned out to be important in Nietzsche's oeuvre or, for that matter, in cultural history more generally, but also can be applied to such contexts as *fin-de-siècle* Latvian literature. The conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian principles elaborated by Nietzsche is in many ways illuminating the aesthetic discussions of the turn-of-the-century Latvian cultural scene with its constantly developing interest in the most significant phenomena in European writing (Burima 2011: 38–40; Kalnačs et al. 2017). In broader terms, this was a turning point in the development of Latvian literature with two subsequent generations of authors who, notwithstanding their differences, were challenging the established aesthetic norms from various perspectives. Being inspired by the topical trends and achievements of European culture, they treated Nietzsche alongside his predecessor and compatriot, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as main representatives of two different epochs of German literature (Grīnuma 2002).

More specifically, while Goethe seemed to represent the intellectual balance of the Apollonian, Nietzsche became, in the eyes of many, an embodiment of the Dionysian principle. However, despite them often being considered as opposites, the creative path of both authors shared many important features. Goethe, by the late 19th century unanimously acknowledged as the most important German author, had constantly been looking for creative freedom, manifest in the early period of the

Sturm und Drang movement but also present in his late work, such as the novel *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* (*Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, 1821–1829), and even in the second part of *Faust* (1832; see Dahnke 1999: 13; Koopmann 1997). The classical shape of some of Goethe's works can be linked to the influence of his Italian trip in the 1780s, which he himself later stylized into a story of a spiritual rebirth overcoming the difficulties of his constant struggle with the material.¹ Nietzsche's radical ideas, on the other hand, were shaped by his training as a classical philologist and by the productive dialogue with cultural tradition. It was the radicality of *The Birth of Tragedy* that burned some of Nietzsche's bridges to the academic discipline, opening the way for the free flow of his own Dionysian energy.

One of the important links between the two authors was provided by their interest in and reception of music. Stefan Hajduk argues that in European antiquity the harmony of the spheres, the atmosphere, "was regarded as an intuitive emotional grasp of the synthesis between the microcosmic order of human society and the stable macrocosmic order of universe, supported by an aesthetic experience of musical harmony" (Hajduk 2022: 185). This perception is echoed in the "Prologue in Heaven" of the first part of Goethe's *Faust* (1808), an important example of the influence of classical aesthetics in his oeuvre. According to the traditional perception, the aesthetic harmony of music expresses the "otherwise inaudible and ineffable eternal formal beauty of planetary spheres in motion" (Hajduk 2022: 187), creating harmony between the universe and individual perception of development. However, Goethe's creativity, inspired as it was by the European modernity with its emphasis on individual agency, also incorporated a radical challenge to earlier tradition. With the advance of the ideas of the Enlightenment, the perception of music as the reflection of planetary harmony underwent radical changes:

[A]lready in early examples of the *Bildungsroman*, as evidenced by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* [*Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, 1795–1796] [...], the enlightened 'wholeness' of man now comes to include personal individual emotionality also in its full range of volatile manifestations, positive and negative, as something the protagonists must learn to handle during their process of identity formation. The modern redefinition of wholeness, enshrined in an individual's gradual maturation, brought with it the transformation of the classical musico-cosmological notion of atmosphere into an understanding of *Stimmung*, mood and atonement that was premised on a psychology of complex yet mutable, and even inconsistent moods (Hajduk 2022: 199).

Goethe's apparent universalism was thus matched by his understanding of swiftly changing historical conditions that made him one of the most radical 18th

1 "Diese [früheren Texte] bestanden teils aus nur entworfenen Arbeiten, ja aus Fragmenten, wie denn meine Unart, vieles anzufangen und bei verminderten Interesse liegenzulassen, mit den Jahren, Beschäftigungen und Zerstreungen allgemach zugenommen hatte." (Goethe 1976: 19)

and early 19th-century thinkers with a truly global approach that also inspired his concept of world literature (Pizer 2014). A similarly radical stance was later in the 19th century taken by Friedrich Nietzsche. At the same time, however, Nietzsche (especially at the early stages of his career) also considered it important to revitalize the role of music not only as a means of expression of individual feelings but also as the basis of reality perception rooted in a complex interplay of different human senses. For this and other reasons, Goethe's ideas remained a constant reference point in Nietzsche's writings.²

The acknowledgement of this dialectical relationship between these two German authors was not fully established in *fin-de-siècle* Latvian intellectual community, despite constant references to them. Nevertheless, the impact of their works was partly due exactly to the tension of the rational and emotional aspects of reception, going beyond the limits of clearly defined reference points. Thus, my aim in this article is to outline various comparative aspects of the reception of Goethe and Nietzsche in the turn-of-the-century Latvian cultural milieu, taking into consideration literary texts and essays, as well as mutual correspondence of several important Latvian writers.

I will begin with a brief comment on the reception history, and then focus on the period between 1893 and 1898 that culminates with the translation as well as the Latvian language theatre production of Goethe's tragedy *Faust* (1808–1832; Dzene 1999: 83–85). Here, I build on the ideas of four principal innovators of Latvian literary culture of the 1890s – Jānis Poruks, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Aspazija, and Rainis –, looking at their constant public references to Goethe, as well as their intense interest in Nietzsche that primarily remained in their private communication. The first public highlight of Nietzsche's reception in Latvia falls into the following decade with the translation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Also sprach Zarathustra*, 1883) by a modernist poet Vilis Plūdons in 1908. An analysis of this generational change is not developed in this article. However, as we will see, Nietzsche was, alongside with Goethe, already hugely present in late 19th-century Latvian intellectual debates.

Goethe and Nietzsche

There is hardly any other German author who would match the importance of Goethe during the rise of 19th-century Latvian elite culture (Mauriņa 1943). Getting acquainted with his works was important for several subsequent generations of authors. The story begins with the translations of

2 See, for example, Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (Nietzsche 2006a).

Goethe's poems into Latvian by Baltic German intellectuals, among them Karl Hugenberg who in 1826 compiled an important poetry volume (Daija and Kalnačs 2022: 14). The older generation of ethnic Latvian authors, including Ernests Dinsbergs, tried their hand as well. His translation of Goethe's *Reynard the Fox* (*Reineke Fuchs*, 1794) was completed by the 1850s when its fragments were printed. The complete translation was published in 1879, and by then Latvian literature had already made a considerable advance. Nevertheless, Dinsbergs's work received an acknowledgement from Jānis Poruks, one of the most prominent *fin-de-siècle* Latvian writers (Poruks 1929: 45). Goethe's poems were also represented in the poetry collection *Little Songs, Translated for the Latvian Language* (*Dziesmiņas, latviešu valodai pārtulkotas*) compiled by Juris Alunāns in 1856. This publication, despite consisting almost exclusively of translations, provided what is often referred to as the starting point of the 'genuine' Latvian national literature (Mintaurs 2022: 110). The volume contained four poems written by Goethe. Other representatives of the generation of the so-called New Latvians, among them Krišjānis Barons, as well as their followers, including the highly appreciated national romanticist poet Auseklis (Miķelis Krogzemis), also tried their hand in translating Goethe's texts.

It was during the 1890s, however, that Goethe's reception by Latvian authors reached a new stage. Echoing the diversity of his interests, as well as eagerly responding to the European dimension of his thinking, the newly aspiring Latvian writers referred to Goethe as one of their most important influences. This was considered a yardstick to measure the seriousness of one's literary intentions. Characteristically, when Hermīne Zālīte and Pēteris Zālīte, the editors of the newly established literary magazine *House Guest's Monthly* (*Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts*, 1895–1905), were looking for a display of their intellectual ambitions, the most appropriate choice turned out to be a Latvian translation of Goethe's *Faust*. When Jānis Poruks refused to undertake this extremely complicated task, the editors approached Aspazija who accomplished the translation in co-operation with Rainis (Mauriņa 1943: 11). It was printed in 1897, and numerous other texts by Goethe were also published in the magazine, including different versions of one and the same poem.

Behind the scenes, however, there was already a growing interest in the work and personality of Friedrich Nietzsche whose German as well as international reputation was on the rise in the 1890s. The steady appeal was partially linked to the tragic circumstances of his personal life, caused by his incurable mental illness. Nietzsche swiftly became a symbol of *fin-de-siècle*'s passionate way of living and thinking – due to his radical challenge of religious beliefs, the boldness of his critical stance, as well as the brilliance of his language (Šuvajevs 2021).

Even more than publications, the letter exchange and surviving personal notes of the turn-of-the-century Latvian authors prove the intensity of their intellectual and emotional encounters with Nietzsche. The German philosopher was their contemporary, highly appreciated but also fiercely disputed, thus demanding a personal judgement (Volkova 2017: 77–78). Nietzsche's importance in Latvian intellectual circles indirectly confirms the opinion that he was "contributing towards thinking on emerging national identities within an interrelated global community" (Morgan 2006: 455). There was certainly a considerable echo in Latvian contexts.

The main points of intersection leading to a certain overlap in the reception of Goethe and Nietzsche in Latvian intellectual circles were the versatility of their writing, the autobiographical element, and the language factor. It is also possible to refer to the connections between different epochs, responding to and confirming Nietzsche's ideas of 'becoming' and of the 'eternal recurrence' that turned out to be productive for the young and insatiable minds of the emerging Latvian intellectuals.

Jānis Poruks and Rūdolfs Blaumanis

The first Latvian author to write an extended comment on Nietzsche's ideas was Jānis Poruks. In 1893, he travelled to Germany where he stayed for slightly more than year in an effort to accomplish his studies at the Dresden Music Academy. Poruks's studies ended rather abruptly due to the lack of money but, importantly, before his return to Riga in spring of 1894 his first book was published in Germany. It was printed by a publishing house established by Philipp Gottheimer, and the small brochure even went into the second print which signals some interest in its topic. It was titled *The Religion of Future* (*Die Religion der Zukunft*, 1894), but the subtitle is even more telling as the book proposes to compare the views of Leo Tolstoy and Friedrich Nietzsche (Vecgrāvis 2023: 164–182). The title was possibly modelled on Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886) which was subtitled "Prelude to a Philosophy of Future", in its turn inspired by Richard Wagner. The book found an echo among wider circles of Latvian intellectuals. Poruks's biographer, Viesturs Vecgrāvis, even suggests that this publication might have inspired the editor Zālīte (who himself had studied philosophy in Jena and written a dissertation on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant) not only to invite Poruks to contribute to the *House Guest's Monthly* but also to offer him a higher salary than was paid to other contributors (Vecgrāvis 2023: 166).

The point that Poruks advances in *The Religion of Future* is a quest for a synthesis between Tolstoy's utopic attempt to reach a new stage of Christianity that would strictly put humility at the core of life perception, and Nietzsche's radical dismissal of the culture of piety while instead searching for intellectual aristocracy embodied in

his idea of Overman (*Übermensch*). Poruks emphasizes Nietzsche's point of the importance of individual initiative, but at the same time believes that cutting all ties with the traditional religious norms and beliefs is too radical. In Poruks's opinion, the knowledge of tradition might still help to achieve a higher self-confidence and stimulate moral rebirth of an individual as well as society.

The book contains Poruks's reflections on themes that were important in the formation of contemporary intellectuals, while the discussed authors (not only Tolstoy and Nietzsche, but also others) are for him of subordinate value even as he builds upon their views. The humility preached by Tolstoy seems illusory to Poruks, therefore he joins Nietzsche in highlighting the importance of personality while connecting the idea of self-formation with the freedom of choice: "Nietzsche's spirit wanders over the mountains to find a place where there would be beings who, absorbed by nature's might, could enjoy it completely and truly" (Poruks 1929c: 32).³

Poruks's neurasthenic character and impulsivity that later developed into mental illness seemingly made him even more akin to Nietzsche. Already in 1898, in an article about contemporary Latvian prose, Ernests Pīpiņš-Vizulis noted that there was something "demonic" about Poruks's character (Pīpiņš-Vizulis 1898: 150). His younger contemporaries hailed Poruks as an exceptional figure, Viktors Eglītis even claiming in 1903 that Poruks was the starting point of all the newest Latvian literature (Eglītis 1903). In 1906, Kārlis Skalbe maintained that Poruks was the first and only Latvian author of interest for an international readership (Skalbe 1906: 110).⁴ Poruks's aspirations matched those of the early 20th-century generation of Latvian writers predominantly interested in the aesthetic merits of literature. These authors were referred to as the generation of decadence; it is important to remember Nietzsche's rather complex use of this term, especially in his late essay *The Case of Wagner* (*Der Fall Wagner*, 1888) where he even called Wagner a "typical decadent who has a sense of necessity in his corrupted taste, who claims it as a higher taste, who knows how to get his corruption accepted as law, as progress, as fulfilment" (Nietzsche 2006c: 453).

In the book where Poruks discussed Tolstoy and Nietzsche he also made his first reference to Goethe, describing the latter as an author close to his own preferred approach of striving for synthesis. This was later repeated in the 1897 preface to the publication of the translation of *Faust* in *House Guest's Monthly*. To a certain extent, Poruks here referred to Goethe in Nietzschean terms as a challenger to the daily

3 Translations from Latvian are by the author of the article.

4 Disagreeing on this latter remark, Rainis made a sad entry into his diary (Rainis 1986: 251).

habits of bourgeois life, and devoted a considerable part of his text to the condemnation of readers unprepared to grasp the fullness of Goethe's ideas. Nevertheless, he expressed hope that the publication might still find its readers, and even people who would be willing to delve into the complexity of the second part of Goethe's tragedy that required intellectual effort and wit to grasp (Poruks 1929b: 138). His overall assessment was that Goethe stands for a constant striving towards ideals, this view matching Poruks's own ideas and to an extent also corresponding to the demands of Nietzsche. Poruks emphasized the same point in his 1900 article juxtaposing Goethe and Shakespeare, and highlighting Goethe's willingness to deal with the potential of human development (Poruks 1929d: 10).

Rūdolfs Blaumanis, a contemporary of Poruks, was at the time considered a more traditional realist author, receiving much less praise regarding his intellectual capacities. Nevertheless, in the context of the swiftly changing Latvian cultural scene it is important to underline Blaumanis's constant efforts both to learn from classical culture as well as to follow contemporary trends. In 1882, when at the age of twenty he returned from the German language school in Riga to his home farmstead "Brakī", he brought with him numerous books. According to the testimony of his brother Arvīds, the most read among those was *Faust*, and Blaumanis constantly admired the scale of Goethe's thought (Volkova 2008: 470). By that time, interest in Goethe had already replaced his earlier passion for Schiller, whom Blaumanis had even tried to imitate by writing an early and immature play in verse. In the summer of 1893, Blaumanis referred to Goethe as his most important literary influence. He also enjoyed Wagner's operas that he presumably saw at the German language City Theatre (*Stadttheater*) in Riga. When Blaumanis's play *The Prodigal Son* (*Pazudušais dēls*) was produced in the Riga Latvian Theatre (*Rīgas Latviešu teātris*) in November, 1893, it was described by Baltic German press as an attempt that matched the classical tradition, even amounting to the scale of tragic Greek drama. This reminds of the deep involvement of Goethe as well as of Nietzsche in the studies of classical culture. Indeed, in his play Blaumanis made an implicit effort to apply the tradition of the Greek choir and thus stimulate a heightened emotional intensity while at the same time paying great attention to the careful construction of the plot and build-up of events. Arguably, both Apollonian and Dionysian elements were thus employed to provide the aesthetic balance of the play. Blaumanis had a keen sense for displaying his characters' emotions while he also preferred a clear outline of the main events without going too far into abstraction. This might have been one of the reasons for his reserved attitude towards the second part of *Faust*, even though he recognized the importance of Goethe's ideas. Notably, Blaumanis expressed his views about the limited possibilities of 19th-century stage in the opening remarks of

his review of the production of Goethe's tragedy in the Riga Latvian theatre in 1898 by stating that this was one of those dramas that could hardly be done justice in theatre (Blaumanis 1959: 171).

Alongside his long-established interest in Goethe, in the 1890s Blaumanis became an avid reader of Nietzsche's works which, according to his own testimony, he got from his friend Victor von Andrejanoff, a Baltic German writer (Volkova 2017: 77). In the letters exchanged between Blaumanis and Latvian author Andrievs Niedra, since the earliest surviving ones of 1894 there are constant references to various ideas expressed in Nietzsche's oeuvre. In a more elaborated fashion, the same interest is documented in the correspondence Blaumanis held with the Baltic German intellectual Eugen Bergmann. In his letters from 1895 onwards, Blaumanis makes constant inquiries and comments in this regard. After asking of Bergmann's opinion about Nietzsche and obviously receiving an affirmation of interest (Bergmann's letters are lost), Blaumanis then delves into sharing his own opinion, referring to Nietzsche as the brightest spirit in contemporary literature. However, he also contrasts Nietzsche to Goethe by saying that there is something unhealthy in Nietzsche's views, and that this becomes especially obvious when, after delving into Nietzsche's world of thought, one goes back to reading Goethe (Volkova 2017: 77). This kind of love-hate spiritual relationship with Nietzsche was in fact characteristic to all late 19th-century Latvian authors who, recognizing the topicality of Nietzsche's ideas, at the same time remained cautious and occasionally were even repulsed by his radicalism.

The most pronounced statement about Nietzsche made by Blaumanis was in a memorial article published in 1900 shortly after Nietzsche's death. Among his other merits, Blaumanis was especially impressed by Nietzsche's language:

Nietzsche wrote for the most part in the open countryside, walking, stopping, or laying down, with the Italian or Swiss countryside in front of his eyes. Thus, we get direct impressions of nature and the fiery temperament of the writer himself. Life and movement everywhere. With unparalleled skill, he knows how to express the various feelings of the soul. Solemn pathos, grim sadness, unspeakable bitterness, passionate enmity – everything was equally at hand for him, like a painter's colours. As a particularly remarkable feature of his writings, the elegance of his language should be mentioned, which, unfortunately, is lost in translation. Even those who do not agree with Nietzsche's thoughts and teachings will not be able to refrain from the power and charm of this language (Blaumanis 1900).

This opinion helps to explain the context of the late 19th-century reception of Nietzsche, and the special affinity Latvian authors felt to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It was above all the highly metaphoric language that at the time fascinated Latvian writers who enjoyed reading Nietzsche in the German original. They also appreciated the ability of Nietzsche to challenge traditional assumptions

in an innovative and playful form, which had mounted up to writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a parody of the New Testament (Zavatta 2022: 16–23). The creative freedom of Nietzsche's writings was an inspiration for Latvian authors who thought carefully about their use of language, expression and style.

Aspazija and Rainis

Considered among the most prominent turn-of-the-century Latvian writers, Aspazija and Rainis had good knowledge of classical and contemporary German literature. Of the two, Aspazija was the first to get recognition; her inspiration taken from German culture became obvious already in her early poem *The Daughter of the Sun* (*Saules meita*, 1894; see Viese 1999: 236). The enthusiastic public response to Aspazija's work encouraged the editor Zālīte to approach her with a request to translate *Faust* which she accepted, also seeing in this a chance for the still unknown Rainis (Jānis Pliekšāns) to prove his poetic skills. The translation of *Faust* was accomplished in their co-operation under changing and largely unfavourable conditions, with Rainis having lost his position as the main editor of the newspaper *Daily Page* (*Dienas Lapa*) in 1895 and struggling for existence. Parts of the translation were done while Rainis was in prison. Aspazija was of a constant editorial help, also working on fragments of the translation. This challenge strengthened Rainis's spirits, and was a source of joy despite difficult circumstances. Importantly, both parts of the tragedy were rendered into Latvian, also due to the changing contexts of Goethe's reception with a growing international interest regarding the second part (Dahnke 1999: 13–14). The success of this translation was vitally important for Rainis who considered it as his literary breakthrough. The interest in Goethe, already developed from his early childhood, was thus immensely strengthened, and the imaginative personal link stimulated further translations. In the early 20th century, when the publisher Ansis Gulbis undertook an attempt to print Goethe's collected works, the seven small volumes that appeared were rendered into Latvian by Rainis and Aspazija.⁵

Rainis preserved the habit of comparing his own opinions, ideas, and plans to those of Goethe throughout his life. As late as in 1926, he was still considering writing an epic poem with the title *The Modern Faust* (*Modernais Fausts*; see Viese 1999). Nevertheless, it is important to remark that comparisons with Goethe were largely made retrospectively. In the 1890s, during the period of translating *Faust*, it was already clear that, despite great respect for Goethe's work, Rainis at the same time

5 The edition included Goethe's poetry, the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774) translated by Aspazija, and several plays mostly translated by Rainis.

acknowledged the distance that separated him and his contemporaries from the time when the tragedy was written. In 1897, Rainis opined in his diary: "*Faust* should be written now as Goethe's work is already getting old. [...] We do not live in times of Goethe's beautiful Greek 'proportion' anymore" (Rainis 1986: 118). Similar ideas were expressed when evaluating the importance of both Goethe and Shakespeare, and the attitude to be formed towards them: "So does the humanity not go ahead and march on anymore? Do we have to learn Shakespeare and Goethe by heart and ruminate on them forever? If we can't surpass them, what's the point of writing poetry anymore; the boredom will smother us" (Rainis 1986: 61). One of the main differences Rainis saw between himself and the author of *Faust* was that Goethe was predominantly concerned with an individual, while Rainis was constantly considering the contribution to social development.

It was on these grounds that Rainis also could not reach an inner agreement with the ideas of Nietzsche despite admitting the German author's literary and philosophical merits. Rainis got a proof of how relevant Nietzsche's ideas were when at the end of the 19th century he and Aspazija spent several weeks in Berlin. In November of 1896, in his *Impressions and Memories from Berlin*, Rainis wrote that Nietzsche was celebrated as "the greatest German philosopher of our time" (Rainis 1983: 89). Strikingly, during 1896 and 1897, while working on his translation of *Faust*, the Latvian writer also made extended comments on Nietzsche's essay *Beyond Good and Evil*. Recognizing Nietzsche's interest of and emphasis on human personality, Rainis disagreed with him regarding the relation between the individual and the masses. Where Nietzsche was direct and ruthless in stressing the inevitability of social differences and opted to speak to the chosen few while denouncing the lack of spiritual interest among the majority, Rainis believed that the possibilities of intellectual growth should be extended to everybody, and considered that Nietzsche had misunderstood the necessary presence of egoism in personality formation:

Egoists themselves have misunderstood egoism. Its most ambitious spirit is Nietzsche, who thought that the unleashed evil, greedy, hedonistic, petty, selfish instincts were the real ones [...] and that these unleashed evil instincts became legalized when he created his overman, who should not have any sympathies for "the least ones", including the oppressed, for example, democrats, women etc. (Rainis 1986: 91)

Nevertheless, Rainis acknowledged the deep crisis of the late 19th-century society, forcefully condemned by Nietzsche, and highly valued the passionate social critique expressed by the German philosopher. Rainis's ideas were thus influenced not only by reading and contemplating Goethe and other classical authors, but also by his encounter with the intellectual world of Nietzsche in whom he discovered a deep personal involvement matching that of Rainis himself.

Conclusion

A summary of the above opinions allows to argue that, during the 1890s, both Goethe and Nietzsche had become focal points of interest for many of the most significant Latvian writers. This was an important feature regarding the steady rise of Latvian elite culture, nurturing the hope that the greatest achievements and topical issues of European art could find an echo in Latvian society.

The four Latvian writers discussed in this article were born in the 1860s and early 1870s. They shared a desire for a radical aesthetic and social change in society, and displayed growing interest in European cultural heritage and new developments alike. Thus, the mentioned authors embodied an ambition to strive toward the highest potentialities displayed by European culture that they not only admired but wanted to match.

Metaphorically, it is possible to argue that Nietzsche's well-known parable of the three stages of inner development – namely, that of a camel, a lion, and a child, with the latter embodying the true spirit of human personality, its “innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes” (Nietzsche 2006d: 264) –, might be applied to the 19th-century maturation process of Latvian culture. Having first been dependent on Baltic German activities, later, in the epoch of the New Latvians, its representatives rebelled against the existing conditions, even while preserving and developing further a lot of their earlier interests and connections. The reception of Goethe's works serves here as a good example. However, the inner freedom referred to by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as the stage of childhood, was arguably also reached by Latvian society by the end of the 19th century. This led to the discovery of new aesthetic possibilities. The further growth of interest in Nietzsche's work started to provide a fascinating model for the so-called decadent movement in Latvian culture. This later stage remains beyond the scope of the present article. However, the message that “God is dead” (Nietzsche 2006d: 255), which in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* served as a starting point for the growth of Nietzsche's ideas, was already registered by the *fin-de-siècle* Latvian artistic circles, and interpreted as a necessity to delve deeply into the material as well as spiritual realities of contemporary secular life.

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